

# *Tao Te Ching* (book)

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The ***Tao Te Ching*** [simplified Chinese: 道德经; traditional Chinese: 道德經; pinyin: *Dàodéjīng*], also referred to as the *Lao Tzu* [Chinese: 老子; pinyin: *Lǎozǐ*] is an ancient Chinese text consisting of spiritual teachings, folk wisdom, political instruction, cosmology, observations of nature, anti-Confucian doctrine, and mystical insights. Just as the Chinese language has experienced numerous transformations, the *Tao Te Ching* has changed and evolved over time. The present form of the *Tao Te Ching* is an amalgam of the combined wisdom and insight of many Chinese sages, which took form between the seventh and second centuries B.C.E.<sup>[1]</sup>

Next to the Bible and *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Tao Te Ching* is the most translated book in the world. Well over a hundred different renditions of the Taoist classic have been made into English alone, not to mention the dozens in German, French, Italian, Dutch, Latin, and other European languages. There are several reasons for the superabundance of translations. The first is that the *Tao Te Ching* is considered to be the fundamental text of both philosophical Taoism [*taojia*] and religious Taoism [*taojiao*].... As such, the *Tao Te Ching* shares crucial points of similarity with other major religious scriptures the world over.

The second reason for the popularity of the *Tao Te Ching* is its brevity. There are few bona fide classics that are so short, yet so packed with food for thought. One can read and reread the *Tao Te Ching* scores of times without exhausting the insights it offers.

The third aspect that accounts for the wide repute of the *Tao Te Ching* is its deceptive simplicity: In the words of the author himself, it is supposedly "very easy to understand," when actually it is quite difficult to comprehend fully. Paradox is the essence of the *Tao Te Ching*, so much so that even scholars with a solid grounding in classical Chinese cannot be sure they have grasped what the Old Master is really saying in his pithy maxims....<sup>[2]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Background
  - 1.1 The Historical Legend of Lao Tzu
  - 1.2 The Taoist Meditation Tradition of Lao Tzu
  - 1.3 Interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching*
- 2 The Introduction of the *Tao Te Ching* to the West
  - 2.1 Earliest Interpretations: The *Tao-te-ching* and Christianity
  - 2.2 Western Adaptation: Confronting the Mystery of Tao
  - 2.3 Recent Scholarship: Addressing the Biases of the Past
- 3 Theosophical Commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching*
  - 3.1 H.P. Blavatsky
    - 3.1.1 *Isis Unveiled*, 1877.
    - 3.1.2 *The Secret Doctrine*, 1888.
    - 3.1.3 *The Key to Theosophy*, 1889.
    - 3.1.4 *Theosophical Glossary*, 1892.
  - 3.2 Walter Old
    - 3.2.1 "Tao" from *Lucifer*, 1892.
    - 3.2.2 *The Book of the Path of Virtue*, 1894.
    - 3.2.3 "The Meaning of Tao" from *The Theosophical Review*, 1903.
    - 3.2.4 *The Simple Way*, 1904.

- 3.3 *Mercury* (William John Walters, Editor), 1894.
- 3.4 C.H.A. Bjerregaard
  - 3.4.1 “Tao: The Chinese “Being”” from *The Metaphysical Magazine*, 1895.
  - 3.4.2 *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*, 1912.
- 3.5 Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 1897/1911.
- 3.6 Otway Cuffe, *The Theosophic Messenger*, 1900.
- 3.7 G.R.S. Mead & Paul Carus, *The Theosophical Review*, 1904.
- 3.8 Charles Johnston
  - 3.8.1 “The Religion of China” from *Theosophical Quarterly*, 1906.
  - 3.8.2 “Tao-Teh-King” from *Theosophical Quarterly*, 1921-23.
- 3.9 C. Jinarajadasa
  - 3.9.1 “The Search for Reality: Taoism” from *Theosophy and Modern Thought*, 1915.
  - 3.9.2 *The Book of Tao*, 1933.
- 3.10 “Taoism and Lao-tse” from *The Theosophical Path* (Katherine Tingley, Editor), 1922.
- 3.11 “Notes on the *Tao Te King*” from *Theosophy*, 1957-58.
- 3.12 Virginia Hanson, *The American Theosophist*, 1972-73.
- 3.13 Joy Mills, *The American Theosophist*, 1982.
- 3.14 Baden Offord, “The Unwrought Simplicity of Lao Tzu” from *The American Theosophist*, 1987.
- 3.15 Robert S. Ellwood, [Various Works], 1987-2014.
- 3.16 Richard Brooks, “The Theosophy of the Tao Te Ching” from *The Theosophist*, 1998 (reprinted in *Quest*, 2001).
- 3.17 Compilation of Quotations
- 4 *Tao Te Ching* Translations/Versions & Related Publications
  - 4.1 Theosophical Publications
  - 4.2 Chronological List of Major English *Tao-Te-Ching* Translations
  - 4.3 Select Recent English *Tao Te Ching* Translations/Versions
- 5 Online resources
  - 5.1 Articles
  - 5.2 Books
- 6 Notes

## Background

*Tao Te Ching* [lit., “*The Book (or Classic) of the Way and its Power*”] is a work attributed to Lao Tzu. It consists of five thousand pictograms and for that reason is often referred to by the Chinese as *Text of Five Thousand Signs*. The *Tao Te Ching* forms the basis of both philosophical Taoism (*tao-chia*) and religious Taoism (*tao-chiao*). According to tradition, it was written by Lao Tzu during the 6th century B.C.E., but scholars now take the general view that it cannot have come into existence before the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E. The oldest existing copy dates from between 206 and 195 B.C.E.

According to the legend the *Tao Te Ching* was given by Lao Tzu to Yin Hsi, the Guardian of the Mountain Pass, before continuing on his journey to the West. It consists of eighty-one short chapters, the first thirty-seven of which form *The Book of the Way* (Tao), and the remaining forty-four the *Book of the Te*. The reason for this somewhat arbitrary division is that Chapter 1 deals with the *Tao* and chapter 38 with the *Te*. The *Tao Te Ching* contains, apart from Taoist ideas,



Mawangdui *Laozi*

teachings of other philosophical movements. Its central philosophy, revolves around two concepts: the *Tao* (or Way), and the *Te* (Virtue or Power). Further central ideas of the *Tao Te Ching* are *wu-wei* (unmotivated action) and *fu* (the return of all things to their origin or source).<sup>[3]</sup>

Although there are several versions, they are not dramatically different from one another. Present-day scholars usually call the current common text the "received text" to distinguish it from recently discovered manuscripts.

The first of these new discoveries was made in 1973 at Mawangdui in the tomb of an official's son; that tomb has been dated to 168 B.C.E. The Mawangdui *Laozi* was published in 1976. Inscribed on silk, it consists of two texts, A and B, the former dating from about 205-190 B.C., the latter slightly later. These two texts differ from the received version in significant details, but the only major structural difference is that they begin with chapter 38 and end with chapter 37. In other words, the second half of the text comes before the first.

The Guodian *Laozi*, inscribed on bamboo slips, was found in 1993 and published in 1998. The text was unearthed from a royal tutor's tomb at Guodian, near the city of Ying, the capital of the southern kingdom of Chu. This area contains many graves, and fresh discoveries can be expected. Like the Mawangdui *Laozi*, the Guodian *Laozi* was found as part of a trove of related works of politics and cosmology.

The Guodian *Laozi* consists of only about two thousand characters, or 40 percent of the received version, covering in their entirety or in part only thirty-one of the received text's stanzas. The order of the stanzas is utterly different from any later versions. Moreover, it is yet to be determined whether the Guodian *Laozi* represents a sample taken from a larger *Laozi* or is the nucleus of a later five-thousand-character *Laozi*. A current working hypothesis is that the Guodian *Laozi* should be attributed to Laozi, also called Lao Dan, a contemporary of Confucius who may have outlived him, and that the remainder, the non-Guodian text, was the work of an archivist and dates from around 375 B.C.E.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **The Historical Legend of Lao Tzu**

The traditional story of the *Tao Te Ching's* origin is contained in a biography of Lao Tzu and was first written down at the start of the first century BCE by the great historian of China, Ssu-ma Ch'ien. This means that it was committed to paper some four hundred years after Lao Tzu was thought to have lived. Ssu-ma Ch'ien found it very difficult to find any firm details about Lao Tzu - a fact which he acknowledges in his book. He states that Lao Tzu was born in Ch'u Jen village in Lai in the Hu Hsien region of the state of Ch'u. His surname was Li, his personal name was Erh and his public or formal name was Tan. Ssu-ma Ch'ien then goes on to claim that Li Erh Tan was the historian of the archives of the state of Ch'u.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien proceeds to record two events in the life of Li Erh Tan. The first is his meeting with Confucius (K'ung Fu-tzu). We know that K'ung was an historical figure. He lived from either 551 or 521 to 479 BCE. There is also little doubt that he encountered someone named Lao Tzu, for this meeting is recorded also in Confucian sources. However, the accounts of what happened at this meeting differ somewhat according to whether you read the Confucian or Taoist accounts. The name Lao Tzu should be explained here for those who are wondering what Li Erh Tan has to do with Lao Tzu! Lao Tzu is not a proper name. It is an honorific title and simply means 'the old Master.' Thus it is impossible to deduce anything from it about the original name of the person to whom it applied.

According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Lao Tzu was a tough old man who had little time for the likes of K'ung. This is Ssu-ma Ch'ien's account of the encounter:

*When K'ung Fu-tzu went to Chou, he asked Lao Tzu to tutor him in the rites. Lao Tzu replied, 'The very bones of those you talk about have turned to dust. All that remains of them are their words. You know that when a noble lives in times which are good, he travels to court in a carriage. But when times are difficult, he goes where the wind blows. Some say that a wise merchant hides his wealth and thus seems poor. Likewise the sage, if he has great internal virtue, seems on the outside to be a fool.'*

*Stop being so arrogant; all these demands; your self importance and your overkeen enthusiasm - none of this is true to yourself. That is all I have to say to you.'*

*K'ung left and said to his followers, 'I know that a bird can fly; that fishes swim; that animals can run. Things that run can be trapped in nets. What can swim can be caught in traps. Those that fly can be shot down with arrows. But what to do with the dragon. I do not know. It rises on the clouds and the wind. Today I have met Lao Tzu and he is like the dragon.'*

The Confucian account is a little more flattering to K'ung, but retains this image of the wise sage, Lao Tzu, as one who is not trapped by the lure of wealth, power or position. The only other event recorded by Ssu-ma Ch'ien brings us to the legend of the birth of the *Tao Te Ching*:

*Lao Tzu practiced the Way and the Virtue (Tao and Te) and his teachings sought to dispel the self. He lived in Chou for a long time, but seeing its corruption, he departed. Upon reaching the Pass, the Keeper who lived there was delighted to see him and asked him, 'As you are just about to leave this world behind you, would you, for my sake, write a book of your thoughts?' In response to this, Lao Tzu wrote a book in two sections, laying out the Way and the Virtue in some five thousand characters, and then departed. He was never seen again and no-one knows where he went.'*<sup>[5]</sup>



Lao Tzu riding ox

## The Taoist Meditation Tradition of Lao Tzu

**Traditionally, when a Taoist teacher teaches the *Tao Te Ching*, It is spoken to the student [in the original Chinese]. It's actually meant to *penetrate* a person; It's *not* meant to be heard. When Taoist Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis was learning, This is what Taoist Sage Liu Hung Chieh said to him:**

*These are the words,  
This is what they mean, and  
This is how you do them.*

**This is the *theory, practice, and application* of the *Tao Te Ching*. Understanding lies at the center of everything to do with Taoism.**  
[6]

While not as well known as Taoist traditions that developed later, the Taoist Meditation Tradition of Lao Tzu (also known as the "Water Tradition") began a millenium before the *Tao Te Ching* was written and is a living tradition that continues until the present day. There are allusions to and/or metaphors for water practices throughout the *Tao Te Ching*, for example:

*The supreme excellence is to be like water.  
Water's excellence benefits the ten thousand things, yet it does not struggle.  
It settles in the place that many people reject.*



Taoist Sage Liu Hung Chieh & Taoist Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis

*Therefore it is close to the Tao. [Chapter 8]<sup>[7]</sup>*

*Nothing in this world  
is as soft and yielding as water.  
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,  
nothing can surpass it.*

*The soft overcomes the hard;  
the gentle overcomes the rigid.  
Everyone knows this is true,  
but few can put it into practice. [Chapter 78]<sup>[8]</sup>*

There are two main methods of Chinese Taoist meditation: the fire and water approaches. The fire method emphasizes force and pushing forward. It has the characteristics of flame, ever leaping forward to consume more fuel. The water method, on the other hand, believes in effort without force, in relaxation, in letting go. It displays the characteristics of water: softness and flow.

The original water school of Taoism came into flower during Lao Tse's time, around twenty-five hundred years ago. Unlike the Neo-Taoist fire tradition, the original water school Taoists had no great drive toward physical immortality, a major focus of Neo-Taoism. [Neo-Taoism is a major branch of Taoism that came into being in third-century China. It combines Taoist metaphysics with Confucian social and political philosophy.] While the water method is known for not forcing things, for literally letting things occur in their own time, it is far from passive. Adherents of the water method prepare in every possible way so that when circumstances are ripe for successful completion of their practice, they are fully open and available to the moment.

The Taoist water meditation tradition, deeply rooted in the *I Ching*, had a thousand-year history behind it before Lao Tse appeared. Lao Tse did not originate the water method tradition or its basic principles by any means, but he was the first one to record them in writing. He wrote the *Tao Te Ching* on his journey out of the country, trying to get away from worldly life. One of his students, a border guard, refused Lao Tse passage, demanding that he leave behind some principles in writing before he left the country and went into seclusion.

The water method is a practical way to release blockages in the whole mind/body so one can fully transform and ultimately experience conscious harmony with the Tao, right down to one's bone marrow. Then one naturally acts according to the principles of the *Tao Te Ching*. [Many of the phrases of the *Tao Te Ching* are what might be called philosophical sound-bites: one-line explanations that are simplified versions of complete and complicated practices in Taoism....]

The water practices are based on a philosophical perspective that is relevant to everyday life: Whatever you do you must feel comfortable. You learn to exert full effort without strained force. In order to do that, you must refine a certain edge in your mind. To employ all your effort and yet not use force, not contravene the actual limits of the body, the mind, and the spirit, is the gentle way of Lao Tse.<sup>[9]</sup>

Contrasting to the water method are numerous fire traditions, one of which is the Neo-Taoist. Unaware that multiple traditions even exist, most Westerners are surprised to learn how much the traditions differ while simultaneously having many techniques in common. The techniques of the fire and water approaches, moreover, derive from divergent philosophical points of view. This situation has been the source of much confusion about the nature of Taoist practices, both in China and the West.

Since the end of the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.), the fire traditions have been strongly influenced by Buddhist traditions, especially Tibetan tantric Buddhism. This Tibetan influence should not be surprising as, geographically, Tibet is as near to China's Sichuan province as Canada is to New York or Germany is to Switzerland.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching*

Scholars tend to ignore Lao-tzu's emphasis on darkness [which associates the Tao with the moon] and immortality, for it takes the book beyond the reach of academic analysis. For them, darkness is just a more poetic way of describing the mysterious. And immortality is a euphemism for long life. Over the years, they have distilled what they call Lao-tzu's "Taoist philosophy" from the later developments of "Taoist religion." They call the *Taoteching* a treatise on political or military strategy, or they see it as primitive scientific naturalism or utopianism – or just a bunch of sayings. But trying to force the *Taoteching* into the categories of modern discourse not only distorts the *Taoteching*, it also treats the traditions that later Taoism have associated with the text as irrelevant and misguided. Meanwhile, the *Taoteching* continues to inspire millions...as a spiritual text...<sup>[11]</sup>

The *Tao Te Ching* was written during the historical time known as the "Warring States Period" (c475-221 BCE, ending with the victory of the Qin dynasty), hence it has often been interpreted as a political treatise either partially or in its entirety. For example, Robert Henricks, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Dartmouth College, gives a somewhat typical translation/interpretation of the third verse:

*By not elevating the worthy, you bring it about that people will not compete.  
By not valuing goods that are hard to obtain, you bring about that people will not act like thieves.  
By not displaying the desirable you bring about that people will not be confused.*

*Therefore, in the government of the Sage:  
He empties their minds,  
And fills their bellies.  
Weakens their ambitions,  
And strengthens their bones.*

*He constantly causes the people to be without knowledge and without desires.  
If he can bring it about that those with knowledge simply do not dare to act,  
Then there is nothing that will not be in order.*<sup>[12]</sup>

By contrast, the versions by Taoist Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis (Fan Qingren, 1949- ), Taoist Master Hua Ching Ni (1925- ) and Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing (1902-1975, "Master of Five Excellences:" Chinese medicine, t'ai chi ch'uan, calligraphy, painting, and poetry. He was one of the first Chinese teachers to openly teach Westerners.) clearly have a self-cultivation focus, as illustrated in the second "paragraph:"

*Therefore, the Wise Person's rule  
Is to empty the heart and to fortify the belly,  
Is to discourage ambition and to strengthen bones.*<sup>[13]</sup>

*The guidance of the Universal One of natural wholeness is therefore:  
Empty your mind.  
Enjoy good health.  
Weaken your ambitions.  
Strengthen your essence.*<sup>[14]</sup>

*That is why the Sage governs himself by  
relaxing the mind,  
reinforcing the abdomen,  
gentling the will,  
strengthening the bones.*<sup>[15]</sup>



Frantzis explains that to "empty the heart (*hsin/xin*, "heart-mind"), which is the human center of consciousness, means creating the space which allows it to be filled with everything that exists in the universe. "To fortify the belly" means to energize the lower *dan tien*, which has to do with strengthening the *qi* of one's body, but more importantly the entire sense of being completely comfortable with being alive. The reason one should "discourage ambition" is obvious, and "strengthen bones" refers to their connection to the Earth. The *Tao Te Ching* is written from the perspective of what a human being does to connect with the Tao.<sup>[16]</sup> Cheng further elucidates, from the perspective of a Chinese medical doctor, in his commentary:

"Govern" means to regulate by certain principles. "Relaxing the mind" (lit. making the heart vacuous) is the principle of Non-action [*wu wei*]. "Reinforcing the abdomen" means, in the words of the Yellow Emperor [*Huangdi Neijing, The Yellow Emperor's Classic on Internal Medicine*]: "the Sage swallows the Breath (*ch'i*) of the heaven to reach spiritual enlightenment...." The will resides in the spleen.... The bones...are related to the urogenital system. The spleen is the root of post-natal life, and the urogenital system determines pre-natal life. Furthermore, the urogenital system governs one's strength. If one's will is too strong, it will not only harm one's primal energy, but will also harm the very root and trunk of one's life-span. How can one strengthen the bones? By cultivating the spermic essence (*ching*) and filling the bones with marrow as was taught by Ch'i-po, the teacher of the Yellow Emperor. Ch'i-po said, "strengthening of bone and marrow is the root of life itself." If one were to say that the way the Sage governs himself were no more than to fill the belly with food, how could Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching* be worthy of its title?<sup>[17]</sup>

Authors of translations and versions of the *Tao Te Ching* have chosen and/or discussed many different interpretations, for example:

- one according to the way of non-action (*wu wei*)..., another according to longevity techniques, and a third according to politics.<sup>[18]</sup>
- mystic meditation (including allusions to practices for concentration, breath control, purification of the heart and mind (*hsin*), *wu wei*).<sup>[19]</sup>
- philosophical (The Tao; Returning to the Way; Health, Long Life, and Immortality).<sup>[20]</sup>
- metaphysical psychology, taking us far beyond the social or biological factors that have been the main concern of modern psychology.<sup>[21]</sup>
- hermeneutics - the theory and practice of trying to recover the original meaning of written texts.<sup>[22]</sup>
- oracle - much like the *I Ching* - consisting of many short, mystical "seed verses" or *sutras*.<sup>[23]</sup>
- new thought (e.g., Dr. Wayne W. Dyer's *Change Your Thoughts - Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao*).<sup>[24]</sup>

The nature of ancient Chinese is one reason why this scripture, for thousands of years, has "baffled all inquiry." Ancient Chinese is a conceptual language; it is unlike English and other Western languages, which are perceptual. Western languages are rooted in grammar that frames events in real time, identifies subject and object, clarifies relationships, and establishes temporal sequences. Ancient Chinese is based on pictorial representations, without grammar. Characters symbolize concepts that can be interpreted as singular or plural; as a noun, a verb, or an adjective; as happening in the past, present or future. Therefore, when translating from Chinese to English, the Chinese characters must be framed within a perceptual context to be understood. For instance, most of the Chinese text of the *Tao Te Ching* does not identify the subject or the object. It is left up to the translator to identify who is doing the talking, from what perspective, and to whom the message is directed – and then find the English equivalents to support [the] interpretation.<sup>[25]</sup>

Every translation is an interpretation, representing the translator's understanding. The key ideas and their mutual relationship form the architecture of the Taoist universe. The same architecture must be reflected in the translation. For the sake of clarity and consistency,...render the same terms or ideas in the original text into the same terms in

English. If there is a need for a different rendering, the reason [should be] given and the relationship between its first rendering and its new meaning pointed out. [26]

## The Introduction of the *Tao Te Ching* to the West

### Earliest Interpretations: The *Tao-te-ching* and Christianity

The *Tao-te-ching* has acquired a widespread and diverse Western audience, and it appeals to readers on a variety of levels. Many have found it to provide solutions to Western religious, philosophical, and social problems. Today's scholars of Taoism tend to view these popular Western interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching* critically; however, earlier scholarship has been a major source for current popular understandings of the text....

The earliest known Western translation of the *Tao-te-ching* was a Latin version produced by Jesuit missionaries in China, and presented to the British Royal Society in 1788. The translators' stated intent was to show that "the Mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Incarnate God were anciently known to the Chinese nation" (Legge...). Speculations about Christian doctrine hidden within the *Tao-te-ching* were a popular topic among missionaries, and the first scholarly studies of the text, commencing fifty years later, continued these speculations.

In 1820, J.P. Abel-Rémusat, in his "Mémoire sur la vie et les ouvrages de Lao-tseu," published the bizarre claim that the Hebrew consonants signifying Yahweh are represented by the three Chinese characters in the opening lines of Chapter 14. Abel-Rémusat also interpreted Tao in a way that was compatible with his understanding of the God of Christianity.... In 1842, Abel-Rémusat's student, Stanislas Julien, called his teacher to task on a number of issues when he published a complete French translation. In the introduction he demonstrated the fallacy of Abel-Rémusat's strange hypothesis about chapter 14, and questioned his understanding of Tao.... Julien's work was based on substantial scholarly underpinnings; his interpretation relied on the Chinese commentaries, and he was the first Western scholar whose concern was to present an authentically Chinese understanding of the text.

Like Julien, James Legge, who published the first reliable English translation in 1891, avoided attempts to impose Christian theology onto the text. However, in his introductory remarks, Legge made his sympathies clear and proclaimed Lao-tzu wrong about many things about which Christian doctrine was right, not actually interpreting the text but simply measuring it against preconceived standards.... Legge, Julien, and Abel-Rémusat are by no means the only nineteenth-century interpreters; through 1905, there were thirteen different translations into English alone.... Julien's approach was ignored in most of these translations, and explicit comparisons to Christianity were the norm. [27]

### Western Adaptation: Confronting the Mystery of Tao

During the second major phase of Western interpretation, the *Tao-te-ching* was received no longer as Christian revelation in an alien form or a misguided oriental attempt at wisdom, but in its own right. Nevertheless, religious and philosophical questions remained important, and comparisons with Christianity, even when not explicit, were still influential in interpreting the text. One religious question many interpreters asked was whether or not Tao had qualities that could be associated with Western concepts of supreme deity. Despite the admonition of the first lines of the text—that Tao cannot be defined or understood—scholars speculated frequently about the nature of Tao: Is Tao a mystical Absolute, a form of Supreme Being, the creator of the world, or something else?

The *Tao-te-ching* appealed to many Western interpreters simply as a philosophy of life, as advice on values and behavior in the ordinary, everyday world. Some associated mysticism, and religion in general, with superstition and ignorance. They read the *Tao-te-ching* as a philosophy that could take the place of religion. Others...interpreted



the text in both mystical and practical terms.... [S]everal interpreters of the *Tao-te-ching* who suggested specific reforms of Western thought and values based on the text, believed that it could be used as a therapeutic alternative to Western thought.

Particularly in recent years, popular interpreters have continued to use the text to criticize certain aspects of Western culture and to offer alternatives based on it. Scholars, on the other hand, have become more concerned with producing an authentically Chinese understanding of the ancient text.<sup>[28]</sup>

### **Recent Scholarship: Addressing the Biases of the Past**

Although much effort during the second period was directed toward appropriative interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching* to cure Western ills, there was also much solid and unbiased scholarship before 1980 that laid the groundwork for current *Tao-te-ching* studies. Here the emphasis is on understanding the text as it has been interpreted by the Chinese and within the context of Chinese history and culture, while attempting to eliminate the biases of the first and second periods of Western reception.

For two thousand years Taoism has existed in China as a religious institution, with priestly functionaries, ritual practices, gods and goddesses, heavens and hells, and all the accoutrements of religious organization. In the Taoist religion, Lao-tzu is revered as a god, and the *Tao-te-ching* is one of thousands of texts in the Taoist canon. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some scholars began to point out that all this rich material was being virtually ignored in favor of the philosophy expressed in ancient texts like the *Tao-te-ching*.... The reason for this, they argued, was a bias in favor of a philosophical interpretation of Taoism that had proven immensely attractive to Western thinkers and created an idealized vision of ancient China.

The deliberate appropriation of the *Tao-te-ching* as an antidote to Western problems has been virtually nonexistent among recent scholars, having given way to focus on the text within its Chinese cultural context. Still, many recent scholars of the *Tao-te-ching* have definite agendas based on personal opinions and personal needs and are unlikely to state those agendas.... Hidden attitudes can make the process of evaluating biases in recent interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching* very difficult. Hostility toward opposing points of view is sometimes evident,...but the agenda behind the hostility is usually difficult to discern. Because of the shortage of direct statements about these "post-modernist vision[s]," and also because most recent studies are lengthy and highly complex, recent scholarship on the *Tao-te-ching* is unlikely to have an immediate impact on popular understandings of the text — despite its dedication to correcting earlier misinterpretations.<sup>[29]</sup>

## **Theosophical Commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching***

As is true in a broader sense, despite the plethora of translations and versions there are fewer theosophical commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching* than there are on other Asian scriptural works. The following selected works are intended to provide an overview of theosophical thoughts both over time and reflecting various perspectives. The initial quotations are compiled at the end to present a "portrait" of the relationship of Theosophy and the Tao.

### **H.P. Blavatsky**

*As its name is unknown and its essence is unfathomable, philosophers have called it Tao (Anima Mundi), the uncreate, unborn and eternal energy of nature, manifesting periodically. Nature as well as man when it reaches purity will reach rest, and then all become one with Tao, which is the source of all bliss and felicity.*

*Isis Unveiled*, 1877.

There are two references to "Lao-Tse" in *Isis Unveiled*:

Struck with the accounts of magical exhibitions witnessed and recorded by travellers of every age who had visited Tartary and Thibet, Colonel Yule comes to the conclusion that the natives must have had "at their command the whole encyclopaedia of modern 'Spiritualists.' Du Halde mentions among their sorceries the art of producing by their invocations the figures of Lao-tseu [Lao-tse, the Chinese philosopher] and their divinities *in the air*, and of *making a pencil write answers to questions without anybody touching it.*"<sup>[30]</sup>

Such God-like beings as Gautama-Buddha, Jesus, Tissoo [*sic*, Lao-Tse], Christna [*sic*, Krishna], and a few others had united themselves with their spirits permanently — hence, they became gods on earth. Others, such as Moses, Pythagoras, Apollonius, Plotinus, Confucius, Plato, Iamblichus, and some Christian saints, having at intervals been so united, have taken rank in history as demi-gods and leaders of mankind. When unburdened of their terrestrial tabernacles, their freed souls, henceforth united forever with their spirits, rejoin the whole shining host, which is bound together in one spiritual solidarity of thought and deed, and called "the anointed." Hence, the meaning of the Gnostics, who, by saying that "Christos" suffered spiritually for humanity, implied that his Divine Spirit suffered mostly. <sup>[31]</sup>

### ***The Secret Doctrine, 1888.***

There are a number of references to the "Tao-te-King" and "Lao-tse/Lao-Tze" in *The Secret Doctrine*:

#### *INTRODUCTORY.*

The collective researches of the Orientalists, and especially the labours of late years of the students of comparative Philology and the Science of Religions have led them to ascertain as follows: An immense, incalculable number of MSS., and even printed works *known to have existed, are now to be found no more*. They have disappeared without leaving the slightest trace behind them. Were they works of no importance they might, in the natural course of time, have been left to perish, and their very names would have been obliterated from human memory. But it is not so; for, as now ascertained, most of them contained the true keys to works still extant, and *entirely incomprehensible*, for the greater portion of their readers, *without those additional volumes of Commentaries and explanations*. Such are, for instance, the works of Lao-tse, the predecessor of Confucius.

He is said to have written 930 books on Ethics and religions, and *seventy* on magic, *one thousand in all*. His great work, however, the *heart* of his doctrine, the "Tao-te-King," or the sacred scriptures of the *Taosse*, has in it, as Stanislas Julien shows, only "about 5,000 words" (*Tao-te-King*, p. xxvii.), hardly a dozen of pages, yet Professor Max Muller finds that "the text is unintelligible without commentaries, so that Mr. Julien had to consult more than sixty commentators for the purpose of his translation," the earliest going back as far as the year 163 B.C., *not earlier*, as we see. During the four centuries and a half that preceded this *earliest* of the commentators there was ample time to veil the true Lao-tse doctrine from all but his initiated priests. The Japanese, among whom are now to be found the most learned of the priests and followers of Lao-tse, simply laugh at the blunders and hypotheses of the European Chinese scholars; and tradition affirms that the commentaries to which our Western Sinologues have access are not the *real occult* records, but intentional veils, and that the true commentaries, as well as almost all the texts, have long since *disappeared* from the eyes of the profane. <sup>[32]</sup>

Blavatsky may be referring here to the *Taoist Canon* (Chinese: 道藏; pinyin: *Dàozàng*; Wade-Giles: *Tao Tsang*), knowledge of which would have been difficult to obtain in the late 19th century, and which was still largely inaccessible through most of the 20th century. A scholar of religion, Russell Kirkland, states: "A quarter-century ago [c. 1982], when I began research of Taoists of the Tang period (618-906 CE), any such researcher faced formidable challenges. Not only had the texts of that era never been analyzed by any modern scholar (much less translated into any modern language), but there were not even many helpful research tools by which one could

determine which Taoist texts might even be pertinent.... That state of affairs has now been radically changed. Over the last two or three decades, scholars from around the world have analyzed and translated a growing number of texts from many periods.”<sup>[33]</sup>

#### *THE EARTH, THE CHILD OF THE MOON.*

This is one of the “seven mysteries of the Moon,” and it is now revealed. The seven “mysteries” are called by the Japanese *Yamaboosis*, the mystics of the Lao-Tze sect and the ascetic monks of Kioto, the Dzenodoo — the “seven jewels.” Only the Japanese and the Chinese Buddhist ascetics and Initiates are, if possible, even more reticent in giving out their “Knowledge” than are the Hindus.<sup>[34]</sup>

#### *ON KWAN-SHI-YIN AND KWAN-YIN.*

Max Muller, in his “False Analogies,” says that “the most celebrated Chinese scholar of his time, Abel Rémusat,” maintains “that the three syllables I Hi Wei (in the fourteenth chapter of the *Tao-te-king*) were meant for Je-ho-vah (*Science of Religion*, p. 332); and again, Father Amyot, who “feels certain that the three persons of the Trinity could be recognised” in the same work. <sup>[35]</sup>

#### *THE THREE KINDS OF LIGHT.*

“The Spirit, whose essence is eternal, one and self-existent,” emanates a pure ethereal LIGHT — a dual light not perceptible to the elementary senses — in the Purânas, in the Bible, in the Sepher Jezirah, the Greek and Latin hymns, in the Book of Hermes, in the Chaldean Book of Numbers, in the esotericism of Lao-tse, everywhere. In the Kabala, which explains the secret meaning of Genesis, this light is the DUAL-MAN, or the Androgyne (rather the sexless) angels, whose generic name is ADAM KADMON. It is they who complete man, whose ethereal form is emanated by other divine, but far lower beings, who solidify the body with clay, or the “dust of the ground” — an allegory indeed, but as scientific as any Darwinian evolution and more *true*.<sup>[36]</sup>

#### ***The Key to Theosophy, 1889.***

There are references to "Laotze" and "his *Tao-te-King*" in *The Key to Theosophy: Being a Clear Exposition in the Form of Question and Answer of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy for the Study of which The Theosophical Society has been Founded*:

#### *ON THE SACREDNESS OF THE PLEDGE*

ENQUIRER. Have you any ethical system that you carry out in the Society?

THEOSOPHIST. The ethics are there, ready and clear enough for whomsoever would follow them. They are the essence and cream of the world's ethics, gathered from the teachings of all the world's great reformers. Therefore, you will find represented therein Confucius and Zoroaster, Laotze and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the precepts of Gautama Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth, of Hillel and his school, as of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and their schools.<sup>[37]</sup>

#### *ON THE VARIOUS "PRINCIPLES" IN MAN*

ENQUIRER. I have heard a good deal about this constitution of the "inner man" as you call it, but could never make "head or tail of it" as Gabalis expresses it.

THEOSOPHIST. Of course, it is most difficult, and, as you say, "puzzling" to understand correctly and distinguish between the various *aspects*, called by us the "principles" of the real EGO. It is the more so

as there exists a notable difference in the numbering of those principles by various Eastern schools, though at the bottom there is the same identical substratum of teaching.

ENQUIRER. Do you mean the Vedantins, as an instance? Don't they divide your seven "principles" into five only?

THEOSOPHIST. They do; but though I would not presume to dispute the point with a learned Vedantin, I may yet state as my private opinion that they have an obvious reason for it. With them it is only that compound spiritual aggregate which consists of various mental aspects that is called *Man* at all, the physical body being in their view something beneath contempt, and merely an *illusion*. Nor is the Vedanta the only philosophy to reckon in this manner. Lao-Tze, in his *Tao-te-King*, mentions only five principles, because he, like the Vedantins, omits to include two principles, namely, the spirit (Atma) and the physical body, the latter of which, moreover, he calls "the cadaver." Then there is the *Taraka Raja Yoga School*. Its teaching recognises only three "principles" in fact; but then, in reality, their *Sthulopadi*, or the physical body, in its waking conscious state, their *Sukshmopadhi*, the same body in *Svapna*, or the dreaming state, and their *Karanopadhi* or "causal body," or that which passes from one incarnation to another, are all dual in their aspects, and thus make six. Add to this Atma, the impersonal divine principle or the immortal element in Man, undistinguished from the Universal Spirit, and you have the same seven again. (See *The Secret Doctrine* for a clearer explanation. Vol. I., p. 157.) They are welcome to hold to their division; we hold to ours.<sup>[38]</sup>

### ***Theosophical Glossary, 1892.***

**Tao-teh-king** (*Chin.*). *Lit.*, "The Book of the Perfectibility of Nature" written by the great philosopher Lao-tze. It is a kind of cosmogony which contains all the fundamental tenets of Esoteric Cosmogogenesis. Thus he says that in the beginning there was naught but limitless and boundless Space. All that lives and is, was born in it, from the "Principle which exists by Itself, developing Itself from Itself", *i.e.*, *Swabhâvat*. As its name is unknown and its essence is unfathomable, philosophers have called it Tao (*Anima Mundi*), the uncreate, unborn and eternal energy of nature, manifesting periodically. Nature as well as man when it reaches purity will reach rest, and then all become one with Tao, which is the source of all bliss and felicity. As in the Hindu and Buddhistic philosophies, such purity and bliss and immortality can only be reached through the exercise of virtue and the perfect quietude of our worldly spirit; the human mind has to control and finally subdue and even crush the turbulent action of man's physical nature; and the sooner he reaches the required degree of moral purification, the happier he will feel. (See *Annales du Musée Guimet*, Vols. XI. and XII.; *Etudes sur la Religion des Chinois*, by Dr. Groot.) As the famous Sinologist, Pauthier, remarked: "Human Wisdom can never use language more holy and profound".<sup>[39]</sup>

### **Walter Old**

***Tao in this [universal] sense seems to correspond to the Parabrahm of the Vedantins, the Ain Suph of the Kabalists, the Athyr of the Egyptians, and the Monad of the Greeks.***<sup>[40]</sup>

### **"Tao" from *Lucifer*, 1892.**

Old contributed the article entitled "Tao: a lecture delivered at the Blavatsky Lodge, London" in *Lucifer*, Vol. XI, No. 61, September 15, 1892. Following is an excerpt related to Lao-tze:

Lao-tze makes a distinction between the Supreme Source of all things, Tao the ineffable, and Nature, which is the Mother of every thing. Tao, the Supreme Source and essence of the Universal spirit, self-existent, uncreate and eternal, the origin of all creations, and of all worlds, as of the Gods who made and govern them, is, says Lao-tze, "by nature, One."

One and universal is Tao, but the first has produced a second, and the second a third, and these three are all things. In vain may your senses enquire concerning all these; your reason alone can frame anything respecting them and this will tell you that they are only One.

Tao, in this sense seems, to correspond to the Parabrahm of the Esoteric Philosophy, the Ain Suph of the Kabalists, the Athyr of the Egyptians, and the Monad of the Greeks. Lao-tze says:

A man looks upon God as his father, and loves him in like measure. Shall he then not love that which is greater than God?

Hence it appears evident that Tao is not God, nor Nature, yet is greater than either, being All. <sup>[41]</sup>

### ***The Book of the Path of Virtue, 1894.***

*The Book of the Path of Virtue, or a Version of the Tao-Teh-King of Lao-tze, the Chinese Mystic and Philosopher: with an Introduction & Essay on the Tao as Presented in the Writings of Chuang-tze, the Apostle of Tao-tze.* by Walter R. Old is derived from multiple translations, which presages more contemporary versions such as those by Stephen Mitchell (1988), Ursula K. Le Guin (1998), and Wayne Dyer (2008). As the introduction states:

The text of the present work has been adopted after careful reading of the several translations extant, aided by such intuitions as have arisen from familiarity with theosophical and mystical speculations. The titles of the Chapters are not in the original, but were added by one of its numerous commentators.

Regarding the origin of key terms and the title of the work, Old writes:

Now regarding the use of the terms *Tao*, *Teh* and *Tien*, concerning which much discussion has arisen among translators. The word *Tao* has a mystical signification similar to the different terms used by many mystical writers, such as “Verbum,” “Logos,” “Voice,” “Way,” “Path,” “Truth,” “Reason,” &c. I incline to the use of the word “Path” as an equivalent of *Tao*, adding only the comment, which the mystical sense seems to require, “Thou art the Path.” M. Abel Rémusat, Professor of Chinese in Paris, says concerning the term *Tao* : “This word does not seem capable of proper translation save by the word *Logos*, in the triple sense of Sovereign Being, the Reason, and the Word.” Mr. Balfour in his translation of the works of Chuang-tze has used the word *Tao* as a synonym of “Nature,” but the context of our author does not warrant the translation (*vide* ch. IV). So in the expression “the Way of Nature,” Mr Balfour understands “her processes, methods and laws.” The “Reason” is seen as “the Intelligence working in all created things, producing, preserving and life-giving”; while the “Doctrine” is held to be “the true doctrine respecting the laws and mysteries of Nature.” Thus the Way, the Reason, and the Doctrine of Tao are referred to the effects, causes and principles derived from Nature, and the philosophy of Lao-tze is presumed to embody a system which at once engages the intuitional, rational and perceptive powers of Man, the cognizer of Nature.

I venture to think, however, that Tao transcends Nature ; the latter, as “the mother of all things,” being in relation to Tao as an effect to its cause or a body to its soul, which, while expressing, does not comprehend it. Tao seems an equivalent of the mystical term *Sat* of the *Vedānta* philosophy, used to designate the superlative state of pure being, itself unrelated while comprehending all relations.

*Teh* I apprehend to be an equivalent of *Dharma*, as being the mode of existence proper to Tao in its manifestations ; its true meaning being expressed in the words “virtue,” “use”; and the idea conveyed therein is that of *proprium*, that which is proper to the nature of a thing or creature, apart from the accidents of human polity, custom and usage.

*Tien* is a term frequently used to designate Heaven, not as a place but as a *state* of being, and, as in our own phraseology, is often referred to the Deity. Therefore by the “Tao of Heaven” I understand our

perception of the Divine Laws, *lit*: the Path of God.

In translating the title of the *Tao-teh-king*, M. Julien adopts the phrase “the Book of the Way and of Virtue,” but while using this form in the title, he retains the word “Tao” in the text of his work. This method is warranted by the fact that no single term which may be used as the equivalent of *Tao* can be uniformly [*sic*] applied to its context throughout the book. The extreme flexibility of the term “Tao” I consider to be most appropriate to the view of it presented in Ch. I and IV; and in this respect it is similar to many others used in the mystical schools of India, Greece and Egypt, terms which escape definition by their wide suggestiveness.<sup>[42]</sup>

The book concludes with an essay entitled “The Tao.” A review of *The Book of the Path of Virtue*, written by Alexander Fullerton, appears in *The Path* Vol. IX, No. 3, June 1894:

*The Book of the Path of Virtue* is a version of the Chinese Philosopher Lao-tze's *Tao-Teh-King*, to which Mr. Walter R. Old has, in his ever-pleasing style, prefixed an Introduction and added a paper on “The Tao”. The text is largely in the form of proverbs, a few somewhat sagacious without being strikingly profound, but most of them superficial and commonplace, and one rather wonders how wisdom of such mild quality could form the basis of a national school of philosophy. “Doors and windows”, says Lao-tze, “are useful to a house by being cut out”. “A virtuous man is identified with Virtue”. “What is brittle is easily broken”. “Virtue is good”. These truths would seem to be incontestable, and the book contains others quite as much beyond the reach of successful impugment. —[A.F.]<sup>[43]</sup>

### “The Meaning of Tao” from *The Theosophical Review*, 1903.

“The Meaning of Tao” appears in the *The Theosophical Review*, Vol. XXXIII, 1903-4. Old writes in response to a question posed by G.R.S. Mead (that appeared in a review of a work by Charles Booth):

“Does Tao = Dharma? Chuang Tzŭ called the clue Tao, or the Way, and explained that the word was ‘to be understood metaphorically and not in a literal sense as the way or road upon which men walk.’” Undoubtedly the words Tao and Dharma may frequently be used to signify the same thing to the Mongolian and Hindu minds, but both words are capable of great flexibility and the meaning they convey is dependent on the context. Thus the “Dharma” of a Hindu may be his particular work in the world, his duty, as so frequently mentioned in the *Bhagavadgîtâ*; or it may mean his caste-observances as enjoined by the *Dharma Shâstra*, or yet his religion, as in the motto of the Theosophical Society, “*Satyân nâsti paro dharmah*.”

The article concludes:

What then is *Tao*? Clearly it can only be defined in reference to the subject treated of; for the virtue of a man is not that of a tree, nor is the virtue of a tree that of a stone. The word itself is formed from the 185th and 162nd radicals - *show*, chief or principle, and *cho*, motion. Hence it may be defined as Primum Mobile, the first cause,...the Logos, Verbum, or whatever is intended to designate the Supreme Energy - that which is the *cause* of the virtue of all things, *i.e.*, their specific natures, potentialities and aptitudes.

If *Dharma* can be shown to convey this idea, then we may conclude that the words are synonyms, but not otherwise except in a restricted sense. Indeed, from this short study of the subject it would appear that *Dharma* is rather the synonym of *Teh* than of *Tao*.<sup>[44]</sup>

### *The Simple Way*, 1904.



*The Simple Way, Lao-tze (the 'Old Boy'): A New Translation of the Tao-Teh-King with Introduction and Commentary* by Walter Gorn Old [First edition title: *The Book of The Simple Way of Lao-tze: The Contemporary of Confucius, China, B.C. 604, A New Translation from the Text of the Tao-Teh-King, with Introduction and Commentary*] is a revised version in a similar format to *The Book of the Path of Virtue*, with the addition of a commentary on each verse. The revised essay appears as an Introduction entitled "To the Philosopher and his book the *Tao Teh*," and the book has a brief Conclusion which ends:

...the teaching of Lao-tze does not suffer by comparison with any of the great religious systems of the world, and when the question is finally forced upon our consideration, as to where our modern civilisation is leading us, it is to some expression of the doctrine of Original Simplicity that our great thinkers will inevitably revert.<sup>[45]</sup>

### ***Mercury* (William John Walters, Editor), 1894.**

***The wise man knows himself to be a part of the [Tao], one with all.***

An brief amalgam of phrases attributed to Lao-tse, partly misattributed and taken from various sources (*see Notes*), appears in the periodical *Mercury*, Vol. I, No. 3, September 1894:<sup>[46]</sup>

To attain God, the heart must be lowly. Trees are carried away by the flood, whilst rushes remain.<sup>[47]</sup>  
The wise man knows himself to be a part of the Universal, one with all. Therefore, he does not put himself first; he abandons himself, and yet is preserved. He is great because he has no selfishness.<sup>[48]</sup>  
He is not self-displaying, therefore he shines. He is not self-praising, therefore he has merit. Inasmuch as he does not strive, no one in all the world strives with him. That ancient saying, 'He that loses himself in the All shall be preserved entire,' is no vain utterance.<sup>[49]</sup> — *Lao-Tse*.

### **C.H.A. Bjerregaard**

***Tao is ultimate thought, and dwells in Silence; hence Being cannot be defined. It is what It is.***

**"Tao: The Chinese "Being"" from *The Metaphysical Magazine*, 1895.**

In 1895-1899, Bjerregaard wrote an extensive series of 31 articles in *The Metaphysical Magazine* on the topic of "Being." The fourth article, *Tao: The Chinese "Being,"* begins:

The Tao-te-king, the Book of Tao, is one of the few remarkable books of the world. It contains, among other teachings, that of Being, as understood by the Chinese. Lao-tsze, who is the accredited founder of Taoism, or that mystical system which the Tao-te-king teaches, is also said to be the author of the book. He lived in the sixth century before Christ.

The word *Tao* has been translated the Way, the Reason, and the Word (Logos) ; but it means much more: *Being*. There are several English, German, and French translations of the book. Being (Tao), in this book as elsewhere, is to be understood in a double sense — esoterically and exoterically. Esoterically it can only be understood when we become entirely passive — as Taoism expresses it, remain *wu wei*; *i.e.*, not-doing, non exerting, absolutely inactive, masterly inactive, or in inertia — and when this undisturbed condition at the same time embraces what Emerson would call "central spontaneity."

Chuang-tsze, the successor to Lao-tsze, emphasized that the very effort to obtain possession of Tao defeats itself, for the simple reason that it is an effort. Porphyry, the Neo-Platonist, in his "Principles of the Theory of Intelligibles," says: "By our intelligence we say many things of the Principle which is

higher than the intelligence. But these things are divined much better by an absence of thought than by thought.” He means that, by allowing the divine faculty of the soul free sway, we shall know Being.

For the time being let us therefore now suspend rationalistic thinking and suppress our ordinary consciousness, which are only characteristics of the surface of the human soul. Below the ordinary consciousness lie large spheres of the soul — subconsciousness, *unterbewusstheit* — as yet unknown to a large majority of people. Those spheres existed before our life on this globe, and they will exist after it has been forgotten. In the subconscious strata we live our true Being; there Being resides; there the Personal originates; there spring the instincts; there rise all our idiosyncrasies as well as all those unclear feelings, undefinable notions, fears, passions, loves, hatreds — all those emotions, longings, and psychic activities which influence us so strongly, yet which never utter themselves through or by means of our reflection.

Ordinary reason and consciousness see only parts of life — *un coin de la vie*; but Subconsciousness is the medium through which we connect with Being, with the Universe, with our race, and with mankind at large. Here the mystery of existence manifests itself. To understand Tao, let us therefore suspend Thought and suppress Desires, or, as the Tao-te-king recommends, let us have mystic communication with the abysses; then we shall have an apprehension of Tao.

He continues by listing *Tao Te Ching* verses that correlate to Esoteric and Exoteric teachings, followed by verses teaching the “Moral aspect and uses of Tao.” The footnote about Verse 14 references a theory first proposed in 1820 by J.P. Abel-Rémusat that “found a parallel between these three words, which in Chinese are *I, Hi, and Wei*, and the three Hebrew letters *I, H, and V* — Jehovah.” The second half of the article explains and compares Taoist concepts primarily with the teachings of mediæval Theosophist Jacob Boehme [Jakob Böhme] about the Abyss, and references German theologian Meister Eckardt [Meister Eckhart von Hochheim].<sup>[50]</sup>

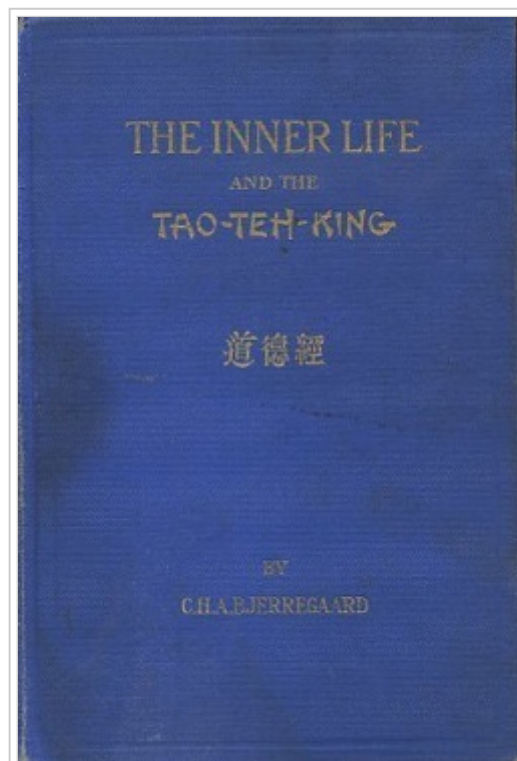
### ***The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King, 1912.***

*The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King* was published in 1912 and consists of 15 chapters that first appeared as a series of articles in *The Word*, VIII-XI, 1908-10 (both published by The Theosophical Publishing Company of New York). These were originally delivered as lectures to the New York Theosophical Society. The Preface makes the link to theosophists, and contains an insightful observation about the inherent divergence between Taoist and Confucian thought:

These chapters were originally lectures to a small, but select company. They are now revised and published for a larger world. They claim not to be exhaustive, but only an attempt in direction of a mystic interpretation of the Tao-Teh-King, a manner of reading that famous book but little practiced and less understood. The only proper way of reading that book is in the light of mysticism. The book can certainly not be handled like a Confucian document.

I lay no claim to be a Sinologist. I have, however, in many places examined the texts and made translations differing somewhat from others. Elsewhere I have used all the known translations, with which I have usually agreed.

It is more than thirty years since I began in this country to call attention to the Tao-Teh-King. It was then an almost unknown book. Since then, several translations and paraphrases have been published in this country and articles



*The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*

of more or less value have appeared in magazines, but much remains to be done if this treasure is to become known where it ought to be known. I hope my undertaking may be a step in that direction. Without the generosity of the theosophists before whom the original lectures were delivered, the book could not have been published. I owe them my profound thanks.<sup>[51]</sup>

A review of *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King* appears in *The American Theosophist*, Vol. XIV, No. 7, April 1913:

On entering a beautiful forest of many varieties of trees, flowers and grasses, one lingers on the path, enjoying the graceful glory of this tree, the beauty of that plant and the exquisite perfume of the flowers. One is lost in reverie and in endeavoring to apply the sermons found in nature, and longs to return again and again to learn from the book of nature. So in reading this volume, there is a desire to frequent its mystic atmosphere, to enjoy the apt aphorisms, select quotations and quaint bits of classic anecdote that begem the philosophical statements which seem to radiate with the very spirit of the author.

The book contains fifteen chapters which were originally lectures and in which the author gives a mystic interpretation of the Tao-Teh-King, the classic work written by Laotzse, the Chinese philosopher, about 550 years B. C.

Mr. Bjerregaard has been an ardent student of this Book of Wisdom and Virtue for thirty-two years. He states that his interest is ever increasing and places the book very high among the treasures that have come to us from the East. In order that some image may be presented to the mind, let the compound word Tao-Teh-King mean: The book which treats both of the Logos and of Nature, of the Word and of Reason, of the Way, the Truth and the Life. The book, we are told, is a series of nature notes, it is nature mysticism. It is a song that comes from nature's heart and not from any university. It is nature or spirit made visible.

The first three chapters on the Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King are introductory and prepare the reader for the soul of the book, which is found in the succeeding chapters relative to the Tao-Teh-King. Laotzse teaches that the True Self is only found in the stillness, in solitude, which he calls Wu-Wei. All through this inspiring book is heard the call of Wu-Wei: Be still and know. Had you thought that stillness is not possible without purity and, on the other hand, that stillness produces purity? That no man is strong unless he is pure, and no one can be pure without being strong?

Much can be learned from the chapter on *Laotzse*, about his book and about Taoism, while the chapter on *Nature Worship* brings one into the Wu-Wei state of consciousness where there is the realization that Nature with infinite patience and stillness forces one to hear the voice of Truth.

The ninth chapter treats particularly of *Tao*, with a very elucidating diagram; and the succeeding discourse is on *Teh*, also accompanied by a diagram designating the four inherent powers as Life, Love, Light and Will.

The author takes as his text the candle and illustrates the phrase "the soul is the candle of the Lord." A potted plant serves him in explaining how the root of the plant is the Eternal Being of Teh; the stem is "the coming to be;" the blossom is revelation in all fullness, in all fulfilment.

The study of Tao-Teh leads one to the soul of Nature. She is a savior, an ever present deliverer; she is change and transmutation, she is an image of Eternal Beauty, she is birth, death, and immortality. It is manifest how greatly enriched is the author from his long years of faithful study of this Oriental classic of Wisdom and Virtue.

Don't fail to get this book. Don't just read it—but carefully study it, and you will love it and often go back to it again and again. A. H. T.<sup>[52]</sup>

**Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 1897/1911.**

***On putting away of desire is laid much stress in Tāoism...***

In the *Tāo Te Ching* the teaching as to the Unmanifested and the Manifested comes out very plainly.

The Tāo that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tāo. (Page 8) The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. Having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth, having a name, it is the Mother of all things...Under these two aspects it is really the same; but as development takes place it receives the different names. Together we call them the Mystery (i, 1,2,4).

Students of the Kabbalah will be reminded of one of the Divine Names, “the Concealed Mystery.” Again:

There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before heaven and earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted). It may be regarded as the Mother of all things. I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Tāo. Making an effort to give it a name, I call it the Great. Great, it passes on (in constant flow). Passing on, it becomes remote. Having become remote, it returns (xxv, 1-3).

Very interesting it is to see here the idea of the forthgoing and the returning of the One Life, so familiar to us in the Hindu Literature. Familiar seems the verse:

All things under heaven sprang from It as existent (and named) ; that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named) (xl,2).

That a Universe might become, the Unmanifest must give forth the One from whom duality and trinity proceed:

“The Tāo produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced all things. All things leave behind them the Obscurity (out of which they have come), and go forward to embrace the Brightness (into which they have emerged), while they are harmonised by the Breath of vacancy (xlii, 1).” (Page 9)

“Breath of Space” would be a happier translation. Since all is produced from It, It exists in all:

All pervading is the Great Tāo. It may be found on the left hand and on the right. . . It clothes all things as with a garment, and makes no assumption of being their lord; - It may be named in the smallest things. All things return (to their root and disappear), and do not know that it is It which presides over their doing so – It may be named in the greatest things (xxxiv, 1, 2 ).<sup>[53]</sup>

...

On putting away of desire is laid much stress in Tāoism; a commentator on the *Classic of Purity* remarks that understanding the Tāo depends on absolute purity, and

The acquiring the Absolute Purity depends entirely on the putting away of Desire, which is the urgent practical lesson of the Treatise.

The *Tāo Teh Ching* says :

Always without desire we must be found,  
If its deep mystery we would sound;  
But if desire always within us be,

Its outer fringe is all that we shall see. ( i, 3) (Page 11)

Reincarnation does not seem to be so distinctly taught as might have been expected, although passages are found which imply that the main idea was taken for granted and that the entity was considered as ranging through animal as well as human births.<sup>[54]</sup>

...

The unity of moral teaching is not less striking, than the unity of the conceptions of the universe and of the experiences of those who rose out of the prison of the body into the freedom of the higher spheres. It is clear that this body of primeval teaching was in the hands of definite custodians, who had schools in which they taught, disciples who studied their doctrines. The identity of these schools and of their discipline stands out plainly when we study the moral teaching, the demands made on the pupils, and the mental and spiritual states to which they were raised. A caustic division is made in the *Tāo Teh Ching* of the types of scholars:

Scholars of the highest class when they hear about the Tāo, earnestly carry it into practice. Scholars of the middle class, when they have heard about it, seem now to keep it and now to lose it. Scholars of the lowest class, when they have heard about it, laugh greatly at it (*Sacred Books of the East*, xxxix, *op. cit.*, xli, 1).

In the same book we read :

The sage puts his own person last, and yet it is found in the foremost place; he treats his person as if it were foreign to him, and yet that person is preserved. It is not because (Page 30) he has no personal and private ends that therefore such ends are realised? (vii, 2) – He is free from self-display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished ; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged, from self-complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority. It is because he is thus free from striving that therefore no one in the world is able to strive with him (xxii, 2). There is no guilt greater than to sanction ambition ; no calamity greater than to be discontented with one's lot ; no fault greater than the wish to be getting (xlvi,2). To those who are good (to me) I am good; and to those who are not good (to me) I am also good; and thus all get to be good. To those who are sincere (with me) I am sincere; and to those who are not sincere (with me) I am also sincere; and thus (all) get to be sincere (xlix, 1). He who has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Tāo) is like an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him ; fierce beasts will not seize him; birds of prey will not strike him – (lv, 1), I have three precious things which I prize and hold fast. The first is gentleness; the second is economy; the third is shrinking from taking precedence of others. . . Gentleness is sure to be victorious, even in battle, and firmly to maintain its ground. Heaven will save its possessor, by his (very) gentleness protecting him (lxvii,2,4).<sup>[55]</sup>

**Otway Cuffe, *The Theosophic Messenger*, 1900.**

***In the Tao-teh-King...the idea may be studied, but the inner meaning can only be sensed by meditation, never in terms of the intellect.***

In *The Theosophic Messenger*, Vol. I, No. 10, July 1900, a question about understanding “spirituality” and the qualities of a “spiritual man” is posed in the “Enquirer” section. One of the replies posted is attributed to “O.C.,” whom is most likely Otway Cuffe, General Secretary of the European Section of the Theosophical Society from 1898-1900. Following is an excerpt:

May it not be that the “spiritual” man, in the full sense, is the equivalent of one who is spoken of in the Buddhist teachings as having attained Nirvana ? — the final extinction of all separateness, the full identification of the consciousness with the One Life ? — the first step, the birth into the spiritual world, taking place when the aspirant has so far eliminated the personality that he can come

consciously into touch with the Life, thenceforward to have but one desire, namely, to become ever a more perfect instrument for the purposes of that Life.

This is also the attainment of the Tao, in the teaching of the great Chinese sage. In the *Tao-teh-King* and the writings of Chuang-tze the idea may be studied, but the inner meaning can only be sensed by meditation, never in terms of the intellect. Laotze and Chuang-tze try to suggest the Reality by means of intellectual paradox. One this is, however, amply clear from their writings, and that is that they regard spirituality as being in itself unrelated to action, virtue, or character. All these pertain to the temporary and separated expressions of that Life, but do not inhere in the Life itself.<sup>[56]</sup>

### **G.R.S. Mead & Paul Carus, *The Theosophical Review*, 1904.**

***Not only does the term Tao (word, reason) correspond quite closely to the Greek term Logos, but Lao-tze preaches the ethics of requiting hatred with goodness.***

[Reviews and Notices] “A Convenient Version of the Tao Teh King.” *The Canon of Reason and Virtue (Lao-tze's Tao Teh King)*. Translated from the Chinese by Dr. Paul Carus. (London : Kegan Paul, etc.; 1903....)

We are glad to see that Dr. Paul Carus has republished his translation of this famous tractate apart from the text and transliteration, critical notes, etc., of his larger work. Whether or not this King is indeed by the Old Philosopher himself or represents the tradition of his school need not disturb us ; it is a Way of the Wisdom, and we may rest assured that Lao-tze did not invent it. Dr. Carus boldly cuts the knot of the Tao difficulty by translating it Reason and identifying it with the idea of the Logos. In his Foreword he writes :

“Lao-tze's *Tao Teh King* contains so many surprising analogies with Christian thought and sentiment, that were its authenticity and pre-Christian origin not established beyond the shadow of a doubt, one would be inclined to discover in it traces of Christian influence. Not only does the term *Tao* (word, reason) correspond quite closely to the Greek term *Logos*, but Lao-tze preaches the ethics of requiting hatred with goodness. He insists on the necessity of becoming like unto a little child, of returning to primitive simplicity and purity, of non-assertion and non-resistance, and promises that the deficient may be made entire, the crooked will be straightened, the empty will be filled, the worn will be renewed, those who have too little will receive, while those who have too much will be bewildered.”

There is but one fault we have to find with Dr. Carus' translation — not, however, that we are personally in any position to check it with the original — the attempts at versification of the original verse scattered through the prose text are doggerel, and beneath the dignity of their prose environment. G. R. S. M.<sup>[57]</sup>

### **Charles Johnston**

***It is Evident that the Tao of Lao Tse is Brahma or Atma of the Upanishads, described as “the Living Self, the great Mother, full of divinity, who comes forth through life, standing hid in secret, born through creatures.” In Chinese, Tao has three meanings: in the physical sense, it is a Way; in the moral sense, it is Wisdom; in the spiritual sense, it is the Oversoul, the Eternal, the Logos.***

### **“The Religion of China” from *Theosophical Quarterly*, 1906.**

“The Religion of China” appears in *Theosophical Quarterly*, Vol. IV, No. 3, January 1907. The first section discusses Chinese religion in antiquity. The second part primarily considers Lao Tse and the *Tao Teh King*, and begins:

When we come to the Chinese sages, of whom Lao Tse is the most renowned, we find many of the elements which are missing in the older religion of China. Here are the cosmogonies, accounts of the



Creation of the world; and here also are more mystical elements, making a closer approach to what we have found in Egypt and India.

It contains many references to the Upanishads, as well as several citations of Christian works, for example:

The closest approach to...personification of divine Wisdom as the Mother to be found in the New Testament is, perhaps, the sentence of St. Paul to the Corinthians, where he speaks of the Christos as "Theou dunamin kai Theou Sophian," Sophia being taken as the feminine power of the Logos, the Sanskrit Vach. The primordial Mother in Sanskrit is called Aditi, from whom Ten Sons are born, the Host, we might call them, of Planetary Spirits.

"He who knows It, does not speak. He who is ready to speak, does not know It." ([*Tao Teh King*] 61:1 [*sic*, 56:1]) This is exactly the same as the Upanishad sentence: "Of whom It is not thought, of him It is understood; who thinks It, knows It not. It is unknown to the knowing; It is known to the unknowing."

The third section concludes with a statement that anticipates an aspect of later 20th and 21st century scholarship:

It is usual, in studies of the religions of China, to include an account of Buddhism, which reached that country in the sixtieth year of our era. I have thought it better to illustrate only what China herself contributes to the world's religions, omitting what other lands contributed to the religions of China. [58]

### **“Tao-Teh-King” from *Theosophical Quarterly*, 1921-23.**

“Tao-Teh-King: An Interpretation of Lao Tse's Book of the Way and of Righteousness” appears as an 8-part series in *Theosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4, April 1921 - Vol. 20, No. 3, January 1923. This is a version of the entire 81 verses with the author's commentaries included after each verse. Johnston gives no indication how he developed his interpretation/translation. He invokes Chinese commentators of the *Tao Te Ching*, and provides many comparisons to the concept of Logos, the New Testament and other Christian works, the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*, and *Light on the Path*.<sup>[59]</sup> The society responsible for the periodical (Ernest Temple Hargrove's Theosophical Society in America) dissolved some fifteen years later, leaving this translation to lay dormant these many years.<sup>[60]</sup> His commentary on verse 24 indicates a "Chinese expression of the Theosophical method:"

*Who raises himself on tiptoe, stands not firm; who strains his stride, walks not far.  
Who contends for his own view, finds not wisdom.  
Who is self-complacent, gives no light.  
Who boasts of himself, has no true worth.  
Who glorifies himself, shall not long endure.  
Viewed from the Way, these acts are like the leavings of a feast, like a repulsive tumour.  
Therefore, he who has found the Way, shuns these things.*

A Chinese commentator says: “He who stands on tiptoe seeks only to raise his head above others, forgetting that he cannot keep this posture. He who strains his stride, seeks only to outstrip others, forgetting that he cannot continue.”

Another commentary says: “He who is self-complacent, with a sort of partiality for himself, imagines that all other men have less wit than he; he cannot profit by their gifts, therefore he finds not wisdom.” Which would seem to be the Chinese expression of the Theosophical method.

Yet another commentator says: “He who has found the Way, perseveres in humility.”<sup>[61]</sup>

## **C. Jinarajadasa**

***By following the precepts of The Book of Tao the aspirant can make himself fit for the study of practical Occultism...and can strengthen himself for the tests of courage and endurance through which it is necessary to pass before Initiation.***

**“The Search for Reality: Taoism” from *Theosophy and Modern Thought*, 1915.**

In his 1915 compilation of lectures, *Theosophy and Modern Thought*, there is a brief section on Taoism (from lecture IV. The Search for Reality) which includes two excerpts from James Legge's *Tao Teh King* translation.

I wonder to how many of us it has ever occurred to ask how the millions of the vast Chinese Empire have found the Reality ? China has been a strong cultured nation for thousands of years; and how can a people ever be great, or continue from century to century, unless they have found Reality? This is what China did, and she owes her life specially to three Teachers—the Lord Buddha, Lao-Tze, and Confucius. The way to Reality through Buddhism I have already described. The way of Lao-Tze is the old old path of the divine sages of Atlantis, and persistent memories of this path appear in all the religions.

To Lao-Tze, the Reality is the Tao. The Tao — " the Way " — is the inmost essence of all things. It is the Cause of all causes. And yet, paradoxical as it sounds, the Tao does nothing, acts not at all ; in this Quiescence lies the power of the Tao. " The Great Tao has no bodily form, but It produced and nourishes heaven and earth. The Great Tao has no passions, but It causes the sun and the moon to revolve as they do. The Great Tao has no name, but It affects the growth and maintenance of all things." (Legge) The Tao is the heart of being, and whoever finds it finds Reality.

But it is the way of finding that is unique in the teaching of Lao-Tze. The way to the Tao is through utmost quiescence. "The Tao does nothing, so there is nothing it does not do." Thus imitating the Tao must men live, without ambitions, without officious interference of the neighbour, leaving all free to follow their inclinations ; then all live in virtue, growing " as the flower grows, unconsciously, but eagerly anxious to open its soul to the air". We miss the Reality by too much striving, by our " culture," by too much Government, teaches Lao-Tze ; let men be, and they find the Tao.

There are three virtues that men need, Gentleness, Economy, and Humility or shrinking from taking precedence of others. " With Gentleness I can be bold ; with that Economy I can be liberal ; shrinking from taking precedence of others, I can become a vessel of the highest honour. It is the way of the Tao to act without thinking of acting, to conduct affairs without feeling the trouble of them ; to taste without discerning any flavour, to consider the small as great, and the few as many, and to recompense injury with kindness." (Legge)

To recompense injury with kindness, to live without ambitions, to act spontaneously with gentleness as the moment dictates, this is the Way in Taoism ; and all quietists and pietists in all religions attest to this day that whenever they retire thus within themselves, submitting themselves in humility and patience and meekness to God, or to Allah, or to the Tao, they find the Reality.<sup>[62]</sup>

***The Book of Tao, 1933.***

While not a verbatim translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, he writes about perceived aspects of Taoism in Adyar Pamphlet No. 180, *The Book of Tao*, from 1933. [While the "Editor" is uncredited, Jinarajadasa was editor of *The Theosophist* in 1933, so this is quite probably his work.] The *Prefatory Note* states:

*The Book of Tao* is founded on the teaching of the esoteric schools of Chinese philosophy, both Buddhist and Taoist, and takes the form of a summary of their main principles. It is intended as a guide to those who aspire to Initiation into the Ancient Wisdom, and therefore deals rather with Mysticism than Occultism, for only by attaining a high degree of enlightenment can men prepare

themselves for knowledge of the higher sciences, which would otherwise lead them into disaster. By following the precepts of *The Book of Tao* the aspirant can make himself fit for the study of practical Occultism — a dangerous weapon in the hands of those not properly trained — and can strengthen himself for the tests of courage and endurance through which it is necessary to pass before Initiation.

The work is divided into six sections, which treat of Non-attachment, Impersonality, Compassion, Renunciation, Self-reliance and Truth respectively, and to these I have added a number of footnotes to explain the Chinese words that are used in the text and to make the meaning of some obscure passages more intelligible. In most cases I have given the Sanskrit equivalents of the Chinese words, as students of Theosophy will be more familiar with them. [63]

A review of *The Book of Tao* appears in *The American Theosophist*, Vol. XXII No. 8, August 1934:

It is surprising to note how much very interesting and valuable information with regard to the Tao is comprised within the limits of this small pamphlet, which does not give the name of the very competent editor. Not many people know what the Book of Tao actually is — a guide to those who aspire to initiation into the Ancient Wisdom, founded, as it is, on the teaching of the esoteric schools of Chinese philosophy, both Buddhist and Taoist. The explanatory foot-notes are copious, and illuminating to students of Indian philosophy in the careful correlation of the Chinese terminology with the more familiar nomenclature of the Hindus. The little booklet will well repay careful study. — W. G. GREENLEAF.[64]

### **“Taoism and Lao-tse” from *The Theosophical Path* (Katherine Tingley, Editor), 1922.**

***Contrasts and opposites will ever exist until all the elements of the universe, at the end of a great evolutionary period, are absorbed in Tao.***

An article entitled “Taoism and Lao-tse” written by “A Truthseeker” appears in *The Theosophical Path*, Vol. XXIII, No. 6 December 1922. It includes references to relevant sections of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* and *Theosophical Glossary*, as well as to *The Sayings of Lao Tzu / translated from the Chinese* by Lionel Giles (1905) and *Wu Wei : a Phantasy Based on the Philosophy of Lao-Tse / from the Dutch* by Henri Borel (1895, originally part of *Wijsheid en Schoonheid uit China | Wisdom and Beauty from China*). Regarding the latter two works the author states, “Among the treatises on Taoism which are today available to the average person of Europe and America, *The Sayings of Lao Tzu* by Lionel Giles and the Dutch writer Henri Borel's *Wu Wei*, are well known.” Following is an excerpt:

Giles's chapter called *War*, in a general way urges against warfare. This admonition is in accordance with the teachings of Theosophy and Madame Tingley, the present Leader of the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society. To give a few quotations from this chapter : “Where troops have been quartered, brambles and thorns spring up. In the track of great armies must follow lean years.” “And he who rejoices in the slaughter of human beings is not fit to work his will in the Empire.” “Weapons, however beautiful, are instruments of ill omen, hateful to all creatures. Therefore he who has Tao will have nothing to do with them.” In the chapter in Giles's work on *Lowliness and Humility* there are these sentences: “The best soldiers are not warlike; the best fighters do not lose their temper. The greatest conquerors are those who overcome their enemies without strife. The greatest directors of men are those who yield place to others.” Any person or any nation, if confronted with the seeming alternative of either going to war or being invaded, might possibly avert vast calamities to humanity by really taking to heart this book *The Sayings of Lao Tzu*. A man only has enemies in so far as there are elements in his own nature hostile to his Higher Self, to which a seeming enemy outside his nature — i.e. the lower nature of some other person — may attach himself or itself, to form a partnership.

The artist who is trying to bring his ideals to fruition in his creations, and who is sorely distressed at the masses of ugliness which appear to encompass his creations of beauty, would profit much from reading the chapter on *Paradoxes* in Giles's book, where a sentence reads: "Among mankind, the recognition of beauty as such implies the idea of ugliness, and the recognition of good implies the idea of evil."

Oriental works on religion such as the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, so much studied by members of the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society, dwell very strongly on the necessity laid upon one who would tread the highest spiritual path of gradually freeing himself from the torment of Nature's opposites, such as heat and cold, joy and grief, life and death, so that ultimately, after many reincarnations on this earth, the aspirant may experience these opposites with absolute equal-mindedness. As long as life on this globe exists, these opposites will also exist; and it is the duty of the artist to try ever to refine and spiritualize the pairs of opposites which are continually confronting him, learning to utilize them in his own works of art. Thus a great painter often contrasts patches of the darkest shades of color with patches of highest lights; or again, thus the great dramatist contrasts in his drama the positive character with the negative, the fair with the ugly, the intellectual with the instinctive, or the compassionate helper of mankind with the helpless weakling. Contrasts and opposites will ever exist until all the elements of the universe, at the end of a great evolutionary period, are absorbed in Tao. [65]

### **"Notes on the *Tao Te King*" from *Theosophy*, 1957-58.**

*For Lao Tze, whether he discusses Tao as a "moral principle," or the implications of reflection upon Tao in the field of law and government, is simply meditating upon the Oneness of all life.* [66]

"Notes on the *Tao Te King*" by an anonymous author appeared as a seven-part series in *Theosophy*, Vols. XLV-XLVI, July 1957 - January 1958. The first article provides a theosophical viewpoint about "scriptural study:"

...the theosophical point of view, as demonstrated by H.P. Blavatsky, is one which regards all doctrinal or verbal forms as being in a transitional rather than a fixed state, "authority" in respect to the great scriptures of the world is most likely to have a debilitating effect upon the creative resources of the individual mind. A great scripture, like a great work of art, should be approached anew each day, as if it were fresh to us and we to it. For we, it is to be hoped, have ourselves changed and grown in perspective meanwhile, even if only to a small degree.

All the profound scriptures are imbued with a special kind of magic. ...then, of course, most importantly from the theosophical point of view, the correlations which link various scriptures are especially illuminating, for they demonstrate the reality of the existence of that universal Wisdom Religion which the word Theosophy represents. The Theosophical Movement is revealed whenever any individual comes to see that... [67]

It goes on to discuss Lao Tzu's belief that "the best government was the government which governs the least" and uses the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* to explain "why he was not simply a forerunner of western 'anarchism.'" The author continues:

Here, we may say, is an expression of the implications any student may derive from pondering the First Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine*, "an Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable Principle on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought — in the words of Mandukya 'unthinkable and unspeakable'."

This, then, is clearly a point of beginning for both the study of theosophical fundamentals and of Taoism. One is enjoined to seek first that which is the same in all beings. The most profound

metaphysical task is that of comprehending that differentiation of soul, the separate "selves," are to be understood only when they are regarded as *united* as well as *differentiated*. This inner self of all is "no more I than it is you."<sup>[68]</sup>

The author makes numerous comparisons and references, to Confucius and Chuangtse, other scriptural writings (*Bhagavad-Gita*, *Dhammapada*, *Upanishads*) and religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Zen), theosophical (Blavatsky, Judge) and other authors (Joseph Campbell, Emerson), and *Tao Te Ching* translators/commentators (M.E. Reynolds, Lin Yutang, R.B. Blakney, Lionel Giles, Holmes Welch) - including Welch's parallel passages from the New Testament and *Tao Te Ching*, from *The Parting of the Way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist Movement* (later published under the title *Taoism: The Parting of the Way*).<sup>[69]</sup>

**Virginia Hanson, *The American Theosophist*, 1972-73.**

***The Tao...is the universal principle of existence, shown as natural, simple, and spontaneous.***

[Book Reviews] *TAO, A poetic version of the Tao Teh Ching of Lao Tsze* by Charles H. Mackintosh; a Quest Miniature; Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1971.... *TAO TEH KING by Lao Tzu, A tentative translation from the Chinese* by Dr. Isabella Mears; London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1971....

The serious student of the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tsze (or Lao Tzu) (5th or 6th century, B. C.) never grows weary of the translations of the *Tao Teh Ching*, the essence of his teachings. The Tao - a word with many shades of meaning but generally referred to as The Way or The Path - is the universal principle of existence, shown as natural, simple, and spontaneous. Throughout the centuries the Tao has remained a living factor in philosophy not only in China but throughout the world.

These two versions of the ancient classic are both poetic, and both contain helpful introductions. The Mears translation carries additional explanatory notes throughout the text, and these are of great assistance to the reader. Both books are reprints of earlier editions, the Mackintosh version being now for the first time published by Quest in one of the miniature editions which make such beautiful and acceptable gifts.

All lovers of the *Tao Teh Ching* will want these two little books on their permanent bookshelf.<sup>[70]</sup>

[Book Reviews] *The Tao-Teh-King, Sayings of Lao-tzu*, translated with commentary by C. Spurgeon Medhurst; a Quest Book; Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972....

The wisdom of the great sage Lao-tzu — *being* wisdom — is timeless, and therefore is as pertinent today as it has always been. It has been preserved for the centuries in a small volume of poetry, *Tao-Teh-King*, or "The Way and Its Power"; also called "A Scripture of the Eternal and Its Characteristics." It was adopted as a canon in the year 666 A. D. during the rule of the Emperor Kao Tsung of the T'ang Dynasty.

The version of which this Quest Book is a translation was first published in 1905. The translator spent 20 years in China as a missionary, and during that time came to regard Lao-tzu's work as a spiritual and inspirational guide. In addition to being a scholar in the Chinese language, Medhurst was a student of comparative religions and metaphysics, and his own commentaries and notes, added to his translations, are extremely valuable to the student. In this Quest edition, some editorial revisions have been made in the commentary and notes, principally to update the printing style and omit some passages which are no longer relevant. No changes at all have been made in the actual translations.<sup>[71]</sup>

**Joy Mills, *The American Theosophist*, 1982.**

***What indeed is the Tao?***

[Book Reviews] *THE TAO IS SILENT* Raymond M. Smullyan; New York: Harper & Row; 1977.... *THE TAO OF POOH* Benjamin Hoff; New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc.; 1982....

It should come as no surprise to lovers of Winnie-the-Pooh that Pooh is a Taoist, but some readers may be amazed to find that even God may be a Taoist. At least according to Raymond Smullyan, internationally known mathematical logician, there is a distinct possibility that God may be just that!

Let's consider Pooh first: Pooh would say he should always be considered first since his "Way" is amazingly consistent with the philosophy of Chuang-tse. Pooh, after all, is the most *effortless* bear anyone has ever met. And he does have certain principles; for example, the "Cottleston Pie Principle." That means, as Hoff explains, that Pooh simply has "that special Something...Inner Nature." Of course, the name of the principle comes from one of Pooh's songs:

Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleson Pie,  
A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly.

What, you may say, has that song to do with the Tao? What indeed *is* the Tao? That is precisely what these two charming and witty books are all about, and no two more delightful books about a serious subject could possibly exist. Whether you think Eastern wisdom (and we mean in this case Chinese philosophy) has any importance for the pragmatic West matters little; since humor and insight are universal, these books make for such reading pleasure that, like the Tao, the experience of encountering Smullyan's and Hoff's whimsical descriptions cannot really be defined. Perhaps that is why Smullyan suggests that "The Tao is a Mysterious Female" (title of one of his chapters). Outside of Plato, the best Socratic dialogue one can read is Smullyan's chapter, "Is God a Taoist?" But then one must also remember that for Smullyan, as for the Taoist,

Whichever way the wind blows,  
Whichever way the world goes,  
Is perfectly all right with me!

That was written some thousands of years ago, by a Taoist sage, but it really sounds like Pooh!<sup>[72]</sup>

**Baden Offord, "The Unwrought Simplicity of Lao Tzu" from *The American Theosophist*, 1987.**

*The paradox, the spiritual fact of Tao, is that by non-interfering everything is accomplished.*

The Theosophical Society has had a long acquaintance with the work of Lao Tzu, the beautiful and lucid *Tao-Teh King*. Not only have there been numerous articles in theosophical journals over the past 100 years, but Lao Tzu has been translated and published many times by the Theosophical Publishing Houses. As early as 1894, Walter Gorn Old brought out a version titled *The Book of the Path of Virtue*. Others published over the years include translations by C. Spurgeon Medhurst in 1905, Carl Bjerregaard in 1911, Isabella Meares in 1916 (still in print), as well as a recent edition by Henry Wei (Quest, 1984). Part of the reason there have been so many editions of the *Tao-Teh King* is that the philosophy presented in this masterpiece of literature includes many significant, timeless and profound insights. To this day, the *Tao-Teh King* remains one of the most translated and interpreted of all books. In any study of the *Tao-Teh King*, it becomes startlingly obvious that scholars have found no consensus on its meaning. To understand the Tao requires the reader to grasp it intuitively and freshly.

...

The unwrought simplicity of Lao Tzu is the embodiment of wisdom, and in that delicate embrace of the subtle and paradoxical there is quiet and understanding beyond words—aptly contained in the austere but precise symbol of Tao. To approach the study of the *Tao-Teh King* you have to be somewhat of a Taoist to begin with. In a preamble



to the study of the Koran, a similar requirement is asked of the reader: "Inwardly we have to be empty, and if we want to have insight and greater opening, then the approach is to be completely empty of notions, expectations and reactions."

This is how we ought to approach the study of the *Tao-Teh King* or any book of wisdom or virtue. Such a study is a theosophical exploration so long as there is that vital quality of discernment, of intelligence in that exploration. A theosophist seeks what the Taoist seeks – an uncomplicated nature capable of wisdom and insight, simple in the sense of selfless. The Tao is not Tao unless it can be laughed at.<sup>[73]</sup>

**Robert S. Ellwood, [Various Works], 1987-2014.**

*You can learn a lot through silence and meditation, which is one of the messages of the Tao Te Ching.*<sup>[74]</sup>

Westerners have appreciated the fundamental writings of philosophical Taoism, the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu (traditionally dated sixth century B.C.E.) and the book of Chuang Tzu (369-286 B.C.E.). These books convey the essential Taoist themes of deep naturalism, inwardness, and gaining through giving. Further, they sparkle with humor and humanity as they direct one's gaze to the folly of solemnity and the wisdom of folly.<sup>[75]</sup>

The most momentous religious event of the millennium beginning around the fifth century B.C.E. Was the life and work of the great religious founders. Only a half-dozen or so persons have filled this awesome vocation, becoming the pivotal figure of religions embracing hundreds of millions of persons, washing over vast geographical areas, and lasting fifteen to twenty-five centuries. They are Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tze, Jesus, and Muhammad. (Others, especially the Hebrew lawgivers and prophets, and the Vedic sages of India, have had a comparable role within their traditions.) Although their stories are encrusted with myth and legend, with the possible exception of Lao-tze they were undoubtedly real persons, and all incarnate in the way in which the person – though he may point beyond himself – has become the central focus of a new religious style.<sup>[76]</sup>

The Dao de jing makes ready use of feminine symbolism to describe the Dao. The Dao is the creative source, which is potential itself and out of which flows existence – an existence sustained by the Dao "stream," just as a mother gives birth out of her womb to a child, who is nourished at her breast.

*The breath of life moves through a deathless valley  
Of mysterious motherhood  
Which conceives and bears the universal seed,  
The seeming of a world never to end,  
'Breath for men to draw from as they will:  
And the more they take of it, the more remains.*<sup>[77]</sup>

Because the feminine symbolism is so pervasive in Daoism, some scholars, such as Ellen Marie Chen, have concluded that Daoism has ties to an ancient Mother Goddess and the Dao itself is the Great Mother.<sup>[78]</sup>

**Richard Brooks, "The Theosophy of the Tao Te Ching" from *The Theosophist*, 1998 (reprinted in *Quest*, 2001).**

*There is much of interest in this little book, the Tao Te Ching, much of which is of immediate relevance to our own dealings with other people. Certainly a compassionate, humble, nonjudgmental, open-minded attitude is important for anyone to adopt towards others. Certainly, attempting to still the mind with daily meditation is highly desirable. And we could all benefit from practicing "yielding" when in a confrontational, hostile situation since meeting hostility with hostility accomplishes very little, if indeed anything worthwhile at all.*

Many Theosophists have fallen in love with the little Chinese classic known as the Tao Te Ching and ascribed to the sage Lao Tzu. We see in it an echo of many familiar Theosophical ideas. Others share our enthusiasm, however, since it has been translated into English more often than any other book except the Bhagavad Gita. But what, exactly, is the nature of this little book? And why does it fascinate people?

**First** of all, it is a short "classic" (ching). It is traditionally divided into eighty-one chapters, which are further organized into two sections, one dealing with tao (literally "way") and one dealing with te (usually translated "virtue," but conveying the idea of "moral force"). There are several different versions of the text, but each contains about five thousand Chinese characters. That makes it a manageable task for a reader.

**Second**, it is often cryptic. Many passages are susceptible of quite different translations. Not only does this offer a challenge to any translator or reader, it also leads to a feeling, on the part of many, that they know what it really means, whereas others have missed the point. In fact, Lao Tzu even encourages this attitude, when he says:

*My words are easy to understand and easy to practice,  
Yet no one under Heaven understands or practices them.  
My words have an ancestor, my deeds have a Lord.  
Precisely because men do not understand this, they do not understand me.  
Because those who understand me are few, I am greatly valued.  
Therefore, the Sage wears a coarse woolen coat, and carries his jade underneath it. [ch. 70]*

To have an "ancestor" and a "lord" was to be part of the social order, that is to say, not to be a wild man. Here it is a metaphorical way of claiming that the Tao Te Ching has a coherent teaching. The last line is a metaphor to say that the teaching is, however, hidden under an apparently rough exterior guise. These lines make an important point for those who cannot read Chinese: one should always be cautious about citing any translation uncritically. And that applies to those in this essay, which are all my own.

**Third**, where one finds general agreement among translators on the meaning of certain passages, the philosophic viewpoint that the Tao Te Ching offers is so strikingly different from our normal way of thinking that it causes us to sit back and reassess our own viewpoint--especially in the realms of metaphysics and interpersonal behavior. Again, Lao Tzu alludes to this when he writes:

*When the best student hears of the Way (tao),  
He practices it diligently.  
When the average student hears of the Way,  
He half believes, half disbelieves it.  
When the foolish student hears of the way,  
He laughs out loud.  
If he didn't laugh, it couldn't be considered the Way! [ch. 41]*

That is true of most really profound teachings. And that is why Theosophists find the Tao Te Ching a book well worth careful, repeated study. But that's just the beginning. We still haven't answered the question what is its nature? The answer to this question is crucial to any translation, since it will color how certain important words, and even whole passages, are translated.

...

Although important metaphysical ideas are scattered throughout the Tao Te Ching, most of them can be found in the tao or first section of the book (chs. 1–37). The **first idea** is that Nature is unitary—one coherent, mysterious, interrelated ground of being, such that it cannot be delineated or described in language, but can only be apprehended in a desire-free, transcendental, unitive experience (clearly a Theosophical idea):

*Something there is mysteriously formed,  
Existing before Heaven and Earth,  
Silent, still, standing alone, unchanging,*

All-pervading, unfailing,  
It may be regarded as the mother of Heaven and Earth.  
I do not know its name; I call it tao.  
If forced to give it a name, I call it Great (ta).  
Being great, it flows out;  
Flowing out means far-reaching;  
Being far-reaching, it is said to return. [ch. 25]

The tao that can be told of is not the unvarying tao;  
The name that can be named is not the unvarying name.  
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;  
The named is the Mother of the ten thousand things.  
Therefore, ever desireless one sees its essence,  
But ever desiring one sees its manifestations.  
These two are the same,  
But after being produced have different names.  
This may be called a mystery:  
A mystery within a mystery,  
The gateway to all essences. [ch. 1]

The **second idea**, as already alluded to above, is that nature or tao is cyclic:

Returning is the movement of tao;  
Weakness [or yielding] is the method of tao;  
The ten thousand things are born from Being;  
And Being is born of Nonbeing. [ch. 40]

This too is a common Theosophical idea. So also is the **third characteristic** of Nature: it is impersonal, not partial to humans or any other beings:

Heaven and, Earth are not humane (jên);  
They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs.  
The Sage is not humane (jên);  
He regards the hundred families as straw dogs. [ch. 5]

"The ten thousand things" in Chinese means "all things"; and "the hundred families" means "all people." The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu (about 369–286 BC prior to the compilation of the Tao Te Ching) reports that certain ancient ceremonies in China used dogs woven of straw; during the ceremony these straw dogs were treated with the greatest respect, but after they had served their purpose in the ceremony they were discarded and trampled on. This idea of the impersonality of Nature runs through all the major philosophical Taoist writings, and it is echoed in letter 10 (88 in the chronological series) of The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett:

Nature is destitute of goodness or malice; she follows only immutable laws when she either gives life and joy, or sends suffering[and] death, and destroys what she has created. . . . The butterfly devoured by a bird becomes that bird, and the little bird killed by an animal goes into a higher form. It is the blind law of necessity and the eternal fitness of things, and hence cannot be called Evil in Nature.

**Fourth**, manifested Nature is dual, having two aspects. These are indicated, in one passage, by the familiar terms yang (more frequently called Heaven or t'ien in the text) and yin (more frequently called Earth or ti). But a closer reading of the text also shows that the two are but different aspects of a more fundamental energy, termed ch'i:

The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang in their arms,  
And by blending the ch'i achieve harmony. [ch. 42]

The Secret Doctrine (1:14–5) has passages in which the "one absolute Reality" ("rootless root," "Be-ness," or "Parabrahman") is called "that Essence which is out of all relation to conditioned existence" and is said to have two aspects, "abstract Space" and "abstract Motion," the latter also called the "Great Breath." H. P. Blavatsky further says that once one passes from this level of abstraction, "duality supervenes in the contrast of Spirit (or consciousness) and Matter, Subject and Object." Yang, then, would be equivalent metaphorically to Spirit and yin to Matter, although they are often interpreted more literally as just "sky" and "earth."

**Finally**, Lao Tzu mentions a trinitarian aspect to Nature. The manifested one not only gives rise to two, but two, in turn, gives rise to three--thence to the "ten thousand things":

*Tao gives birth to one;  
One gives birth to two;  
Two gives birth to three;  
Three gives birth to the ten thousand things. [ch. 42]*

Such a trinitarian aspect of the creative, manifesting side of Nature is a common theme in several of the world's religions. The Secret Doctrine (1:16) also identifies three logoi, the third of which is called "the Universal World-Soul, the Cosmic Noumenon of Matter, the basis of the intelligent operations in and of Nature," which sounds very much like the same idea expressed cryptically above. There is one other passage from the Tao TeChing which some Theosophists have thought even suggests influence from or upon Hindu and Judeo-Christian theology:

*We look at it but do not see it: it is  
termed elusive (or evanescent, minute,  
formless, invisible) (yi);  
We listen to it but do not hear it: it is  
termed inaudible (or rarefied) (hsi);  
We touch it but do not feel it: it is termed  
intangible (or subtle, infinitesimal) (wei). [ch. 14]*

The three words used here to characterize tao are yi, hsi, and wei in Chinese, suggesting a trinitarian parallel with yod, he, and vau or YHV of the Hebrew Divine Name transliterated as Jehovah, or, i, sha, and va of the Hindu "Isvara." But since philosophical Taoism is naturalistic, not theistic, these parallels are more probably a linguistic coincidence. Theosophists shouldn't make too much of them. In fact, H. P. Blavatsky quotes Max Müller in pointing out that this is, in his phrase, a false analogy (SD 1:472).<sup>[79]</sup>

...

There is much of interest [to Theosophists] in this little book, the Tao Te Ching, much of which is of immediate relevance to our own dealings with other people. Certainly a compassionate, humble, nonjudgmental, open-minded attitude is important for anyone to adopt towards others. Certainly, attempting to still the mind with daily meditation is highly desirable. And we could all benefit from practicing "yielding" when in a confrontational, hostile situation since meeting hostility with hostility accomplishes very little, if indeed anything worthwhile at all. It certainly does not resolve a tense situation. And even if we prevail, the person we prevail over is surely left with resentment, as the Tao Te Ching points out:

*When great enemies make peace,  
Some hostility is bound to remain. [ch. 79]*

But that is not to say that we will agree with everything in this little classic. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Way it recommends is in its concept of the ideal State or form of government. The latter has already been hinted at in the quotations from chapters 37 and 48 above on the concept of *wu wei*. It is a policy of laissez faire, in

which there is little or no government interference in the lives of citizens. Perhaps the most quaint expression of this idea is in the first line of chapter 60: “Ruling a large state is like cooking a small fish.” That is, as commentators explain, too much handling will spoil it! Or as the following lines put it:

*The more prohibitions a state has,  
The poorer the people will be. . . .  
The more laws and edicts there are,  
The more theft and fraud there will be. [ch. 57]*

Certainly, as the Mahatmas point out in their letters to A. P. Sinnett, human free will is inviolable, and must not be subjected to the will of another. But the Tao Te Ching seems to imply that people only steal and defraud when they are aware of laws against such things – that, otherwise, they would be naturally free of such self-centered, acquisitive impulses. That seems to border on the naive. It also fails to take into account that, as Theosophy teaches, humans presently are at very different stages of evolution as far as intelligence and morality are concerned; what greatly troubles one person’s conscience does not bother another’s at all. Furthermore, the above passage fails to distinguish between criminal law and civil law. Surely, one would want some sort of general rules about which side of the road to drive on (whether in an oxcart or an automobile), which days are workdays and which holidays, how streets are to be laid out and cared for, and so on. An orderly society needs such general organizing rules just as much as it needs prohibitions against murder and theft.

...

Ideas compatible with Theosophy outnumber those at variance with it. And, of course, there is much more that has not been discussed at all. Perhaps the foregoing will serve to whet the appetites of those unfamiliar with the Tao Te Ching to find several translations, such as those in the reference list below, and begin their own meditative study of it.<sup>[80]</sup>

## Compilation of Quotations

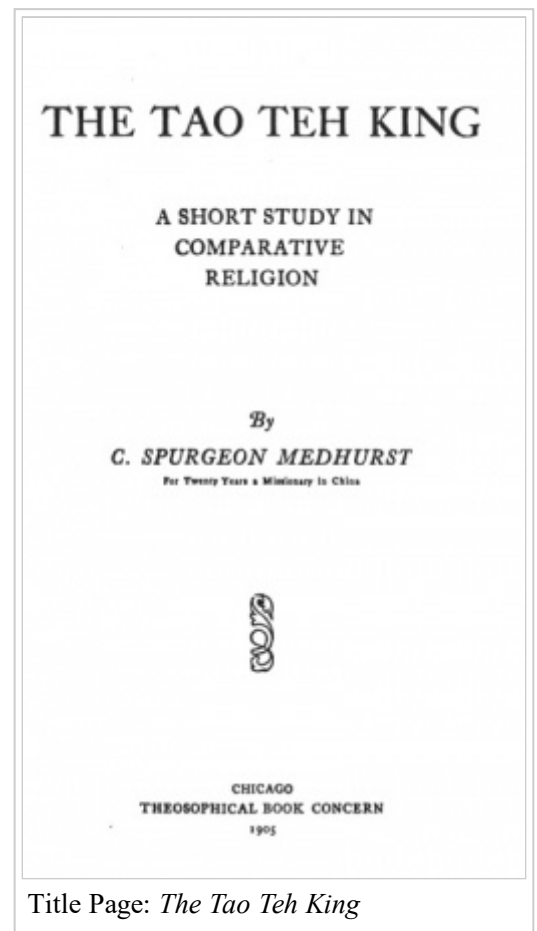
- *As its name is unknown and its essence is unfathomable, philosophers have called it Tao (Anima Mundi), the uncreate, unborn and eternal energy of nature, manifesting periodically. Nature as well as man when it reaches purity will reach rest, and then all become one with Tao, which is the source of all bliss and felicity.*
- *Tao in this [universal] sense seems to correspond to the Parabrahm of the Vedantins, the Ain Suph of the Kabalists, the Athyr of the Egyptians, and the Monad of the Greeks.*
- *The wise man knows himself to be a part of the [Tao], one with all.*
- *Tao is ultimate thought, and dwells in Silence; hence Being cannot be defined. It is what It is.*
- *On putting away of desire is laid much stress in Tāoism...*
- *In the Tao-teh-King...the idea may be studied, but the inner meaning can only be sensed by meditation, never in terms of the intellect.*
- *Not only does the term Tao (word, reason) correspond quite closely to the Greek term Logos, but Lao-tze preaches the ethics of requiting hatred with goodness.*
- *It is Evident that the Tao of Lao Tse is Brahma or Atma of the Upanishads, described as “the Living Self, the great Mother, full of divinity, who comes forth through life, standing hid in secret, born through creatures.” In Chinese, Tao has three meanings: in the physical sense, it is a Way; in the moral sense, it is Wisdom; in the spiritual sense, it is the Oversoul, the Eternal, the Logos.*
- *By following the precepts of The Book of Tao the aspirant can make himself fit for the study of practical Occultism...and can strengthen himself for the tests of courage and endurance through which it is necessary to pass before Initiation.*
- *Contrasts and opposites will ever exist until all the elements of the universe, at the end of a great evolutionary period, are absorbed in Tao.*
- *For Lao Tze, whether he discusses Tao as a “moral principle,” or the implications of reflection upon Tao in the field of law and government, is simply meditating upon the Oneness of all life.*

- *The Tao...is the universal principle of existence, shown as natural, simple, and spontaneous.*
- *What indeed is the Tao?*
- *The paradox, the spiritual fact of Tao, is that by non-interfering everything is accomplished.*
- *You can learn a lot through silence and meditation, which is one of the messages of the Tao Te Ching.*
- *There is much of interest in this little book, the Tao Te Ching, much of which is of immediate relevance to our own dealings with other people. Certainly a compassionate, humble, nonjudgmental, open-minded attitude is important for anyone to adopt towards others. Certainly, attempting to still the mind with daily meditation is highly desirable. And we could all benefit from practicing “yielding” when in a confrontational, hostile situation since meeting hostility with hostility accomplishes very little, if indeed anything worthwhile at all.*

## Tao Te Ching Translations/Versions & Related Publications

### Theosophical Publications

- **Walter R. Old**, *The Book of the Path of Virtue, or a Version of the Tao-Teh-King of Lao-tze, the Chinese Mystic and Philosopher: with an Introduction & Essay on the Tao as Presented in the Writings of Chuang-tze, the Apostle of Tao-tze.* (Madras: The Indian Section of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, 1894)
- **Walter G. Old**, *The Simple Way, Lao-tze (the ‘Old Boy’): A New Translation of the Tao-Teh-King with Introduction and Commentary.* (London : P. Wellby, 1905) [First edition title: *The Book of The Simple Way of Lao-tze: The Contemporary of Confucius, China, B.C. 604, A New Translation from the Text of the Tao-Teh-King, with Introduction and Commentary.* (London : P. Wellby, 1904)]
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- 1886 Herbert A. Giles, *The Remains of Lao Tzu* (London: John Murray).
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- 1975 Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row).
- 1975 Bernard Karlgren, "Notes on Lao Tze." *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 47:1-18.
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- 2016 Solala Towler, *Practicing the Tao Te Ching: 81 Steps on the Way*. (Boulder: Sounds True)

## Online resources

### Articles

The Union Index of Theosophical Periodicals lists: 21 articles about *Tao Te Ching* (<http://www.austheos.org.au/cgi-bin/ui-csvsearch.pl?search=tao+te+ching&method=exact>), 52 articles about *Tao Te/Teh King* (<http://www.austheos.org.au/cgi-bin/ui-csvsearch.pl?search=tao+te+king&method=all>), 56 articles

about **Lao Tzu/Tse** (<http://www.austheos.org.au/cgi-bin/ui-csvsearch.pl?search=Lao+tz&method=all>), and 5 articles about **Lao Tsze** (<http://www.austheos.org.au/cgi-bin/ui-csvsearch.pl?search=Lao+tsze&method=all>). There were no articles listed for **Daodejing** nor **Laozi**.

- Richard W. Brooks, "The Theosophy of the Tao Te Ching, Part One," *Quest* 89:1 (January-February 2001) (<https://www.theosophical.org/42-publications/quest-magazine/1271-the-theosophy-of-the-tao-te-ching-part-one>).
- Richard W. Brooks, "The Theosophy of the Tao Te Ching, Part Two," *Quest* 89:2 (March-April 2001) (<https://www.theosophical.org/42-publications/quest-magazine/1411--sp-1827831470>).

## Books

- Walter R. Old, *The Book of the Path of Virtue* (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100434443>), 1894.
- C. Spurgeon Medhurst, *The Tao Teh King: A Short Study in Comparative Religion* (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005776880>), 1905.
- C.H.A. Bjerregaard, *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King* (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007685710>), 1912.
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