

See • Feel • Tao

A Visual Journey
through the Tao Te Ching

— Lao Tzu —



See · Feel · Tao

A Visual Journey through the
Tao Te Ching
Lao Tzu

PUBLISHED BY: James Godwin

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To Alexander, Brenton, David & Scott
This book is dedicated to you.

In a world that often asks men to walk alone, you have shown me the
quiet strength of walking together.

Thank you for creating a space where truth is spoken without shame,
where struggles are shared without judgement, and where presence—
not perfection—is what matters.

Our circle reminds me that I'm not alone.

In your listening, I've found courage.
In your stories, I've seen myself.
In your presence, I've returned to mine.

With deep gratitude,
James

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Brief introduction to the Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching is one of the world's oldest and most enduring spiritual texts. Attributed to Lao Tzu—an elusive figure said to have lived in ancient China over 2,500 years ago—it offers 81 short chapters of poetic insight into the nature of existence, leadership, humility, and flow.

Tao means “the Way”—not a fixed path, but the natural unfolding of all things. Te refers to inner virtue or integrity. Ching simply means classic or scripture. Together, Tao Te Ching could be translated as “The Classic of the Way and Its Power.”

Unlike many books of philosophy or religion, the Tao Te Ching does not tell you what to believe. It points, quietly and indirectly, inviting each reader to discover the Way for themselves—not through doctrine, but through observation, presence, and return.

Its paradoxes are not puzzles to be solved, but doorways into deeper seeing. It teaches that softness is stronger than hardness, that emptiness is full of potential, and that the wisest leaders often go unnoticed.

This is not a book of answers, but a companion for those walking their own path.

The verses in this edition are based on public domain translations of the Tao Te Ching (notably James Legge's 1891 edition), adapted into modern English by James Godwin.

Who Lao Tzu Was (or Is Thought to Be)

Lao Tzu—meaning “Old Master”—is a name cloaked in mystery. No one knows for certain if he was a single historical figure or a composite of ancient voices. Tradition places him in 6th century BCE China, a contemporary of Confucius. Some say the two even met.

Legend tells of a wise sage who worked as a royal archivist. Disheartened by the corruption of the world, he left the court to live in solitude. At the western gate of the empire, a guard recognised him and asked him to write down his wisdom before disappearing. The result: the Tao Te Ching.

Whether Lao Tzu was a real man, a mythical teacher, or a symbol of ancestral wisdom doesn't diminish the power of his words. Like the Tao itself, his presence is felt more than known—his identity hidden, yet his influence quietly shaping centuries of thought, from Zen to Stoicism, poetry to politics.

He left no commandments, no biography, no trace—only 81 verses, offered like water: clear, humble, and unfathomably deep.

Why this ancient text still speaks to us today

The Tao Te Ching was written over 2,500 years ago, in a time without electricity, global networks, or modern psychology—yet its wisdom remains startlingly relevant.

Why?

Because the Tao speaks not to trends or technologies, but to the human condition. It speaks to the quiet part of us that longs for balance in a world of noise. It speaks to the leader who no longer wants to dominate, but to serve. To the creator who seeks flow instead of force. To the individual who realises that true strength may come from yielding, not striving.

In an age addicted to speed, comparison, and control, the Tao offers a different rhythm: slowness, contentment, surrender.

It teaches us to see through illusion, to stop chasing more, and to reconnect with a deeper, quieter way of being.

The world has changed—but the questions haven't.

How do I live in harmony with life?
How do I act without aggression?
How do I lead without ego?
How do I return to what is simple, true, and whole?

The Tao Te Ching doesn't answer these questions directly. Instead, it invites us into a conversation—one that begins not in the mind, but in the heart.

The Inspiration for This Edition

This edition was born from a longing to see the Tao Te Ching—not just to read it.

For years, I turned to the Tao for quiet guidance. In its pages, I found a stillness that helped me navigate the noise of modern life. But each time I read a verse, I sensed something beyond the words. A visual poetry. A feeling, an image, a moment.

That's what this edition seeks to honour.

By pairing each chapter with an abstract image—either minimal and photographic, or expressive and calligraphic—this book invites you into a deeper, more intuitive relationship with the Tao. Not everything must be understood intellectually. Sometimes, a brushstroke or a breath of empty space can say what words cannot.

Two visual styles accompany each verse:

“See the Tao” offers quiet, contemplative visuals in the Zen photography tradition—capturing the simplicity, stillness, and paradox that echo the Tao.

“Feel the Tao” expresses each teaching with emotive brushstrokes and calligraphic abstraction—where spirit, not precision, guides the hand.

These visual interpretations are not explanations. They are invitations. Each image

is a mirror—one that may reveal something different each time you gaze into it.
This is not just a book to be read.
It is a book to be returned to.
To be felt.
To be seen.

How it blends visual and poetic forms

The Tao Te Ching has always spoken in two voices: one of clarity, and one of mystery. Its wisdom lives not only in what is said—but in what is left unsaid. In silence. In space.

This edition embraces that dual nature.

Each chapter pairs verse and visual—two expressions of the same essence. The words offer a poetic doorway into the Tao, stripped of academic commentary or rigid translation. The images echo that spirit, translating meaning into mood, shape, and emptiness.

Sometimes the words will guide you.
Sometimes the image will speak more clearly.
Sometimes both will disappear, and only presence remains.

There are no footnotes, no interpretations—only invitations. You are encouraged to pause. To feel. To see not just with the mind, but with the body, the breath, the quiet.

The poetic form softens the verses, making space for wonder.
The visual form dissolves boundaries, making space for the unknown.

Together, they create a conversation without explanation.

A space where the Tao may show itself.

Not a Book to Rush Through

This is not a book to read in a hurry.

Each chapter is a doorway.

Each image, a pause.

Each phrase, an invitation to return to something you already know—but may have forgotten.

Let the words sit with you.

Let the images breathe.

There is no need to “get it.”

There is only the practice of quiet seeing, quiet feeling.

Read one verse.

Close the book.

Go outside.

Feel the wind move through the trees.

That too is the Tao.

Invites Contemplation, Stillness, Return

This book is not about learning more. It is about remembering what you already are.

In a world of constant motion and noise, the Tao Te Ching draws us inward—not to withdraw, but to reawaken.

Every passage invites you to stop. To sit with a line until it says nothing... and then, everything.

It doesn't ask you to follow a path.
It invites you to be the path.
To soften. To release. To return.

This is a book to live with, not master.
To revisit, not conquer.
To let its rhythm return you to your own.

Can Be Read Sequentially—Or Like Water

This book offers no set path.

You may choose to read it in order, one chapter flowing gently into the next.
Or you may open it at random— trusting that the page you land on is the one meant for you.

The Tao doesn't demand a method.
It arrives when invited.
Sometimes in sequence.
Sometimes in surprise.

Let each reading meet you where you are.
Not as an answer,
but as a reflection.

A Quiet Relevance

We live in a world flooded with noise, urgency, and endless striving.
The pace quickens. The feed scrolls. The mind fragments.

Taoist wisdom does not offer a louder voice—
it offers an invitation to step back.

In these verses, there is no promise of achievement.
No command to compete.
Only the subtle reminder that life, when unforced, unfolds with grace.

In a culture obsessed with becoming,
the Tao reminds us of the power of simply being.

Stillness is not absence.
It is the presence beneath the noise.
And in returning to it,
we remember something we never truly lost.

Born of a Personal Search

This book was not planned.
It emerged—gently—out of necessity.

In a time of transition and questioning,
I found myself returning again and again to the Tao Te Ching.
Not for answers, but for presence.
Not to be taught, but to be reminded.

The words of Lao Tzu didn't explain life.
They mirrored it—
its paradoxes, its rhythms, its quiet wisdom.

As I slowed down,
I saw how often I'd been chasing borrowed truths,
measuring worth in things that do not last.

This book became a way to see more clearly,
to feel more deeply,
to reconnect with what is essential.

What began as a personal practice—pairing visual stillness with ancient poetry—
soon became a path I felt called to share.

If this book offers you even a moment of quiet clarity,
a breath of truth,
then it has done its work.

A Final Word

You won't find answers in these pages.
But you might find a mirror.

One that reflects your own stillness.
Your own knowing.
Your own Way.

Let it meet you where you are.
Not to guide you forward,
but to bring you home.

A Note of Gratitude

Thank you for picking up this book.

In a world overflowing with noise, your choice to pause—to open a book like this—is no small thing. It honours something quiet within you. Something many forget, but never truly lose.

May these pages serve as a gentle companion. Not to lead you anywhere new—but to remind you of what you already carry.

Stay in the flow,

James



Chapter 1

The Mystery

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

Without a name, it is the source of heaven and earth.
With a name, it becomes the mother of all things.

Free from desire, you see the hidden essence.
Bound by desire, you see only the surface.

Both arise from the same source.
Though named differently, they point to the same truth.

This unity is called Mystery.
Mystery within mystery –
the gateway to all wonder.



Chapter 2

The Dance of Opposites

When people recognise beauty,
they also see ugliness.
When they praise skill,
they create the idea of lack.

Being and non-being give rise to each other.
Difficult and easy shape one another.
Long and short define each other.
High and low reveal each other.
Sound and silence harmonise together.
Before and after follow in turn.

The sage acts without striving
and teaches without speaking.

Things arise – he does not claim them.
They grow – he does not possess them.
They unfold – he does not control them.

He completes his task,
then lets it go.
Because he does not cling,
his power endures.



Chapter 3

Quiet Leadership

Do not glorify the gifted,
and people will not compete.
Do not treasure rare goods,
and people will not steal.
Do not show off possessions,
and people will remain at peace.

The sage governs
by emptying minds,
filling bellies,
softening ambition,
and strengthening character.

He keeps the people
free from craving and cleverness,
so they do not act against the Way.

By letting go of force,
harmony arises on its own.



Chapter 4

The Infinite Vessel

The Tao is like an empty vessel,
yet it can never be filled.

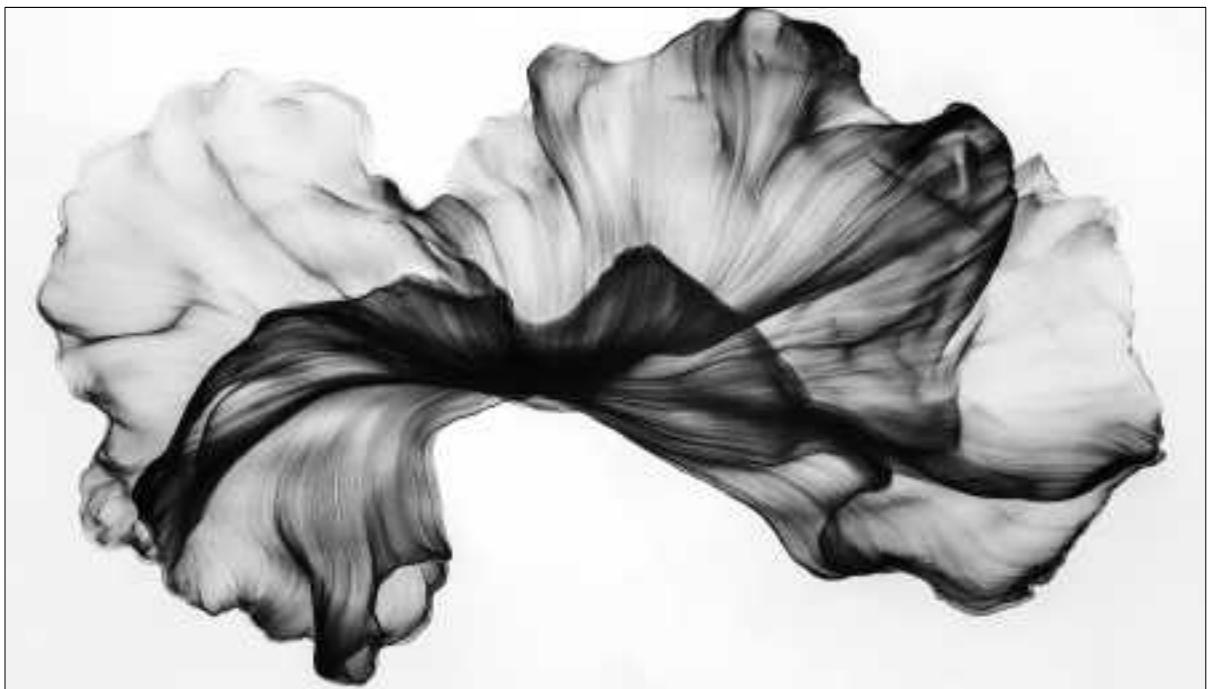
In using it,
guard against excess.

It is deep,
unfathomable —
the ancestor of all things.

Soften your sharpness.
Untangle your knots.
Dim your brilliance.
Blend with the dust.

So pure, so still —
it endures forever.

I do not know whose child it is.
It came before the gods.



Chapter 5

Impartial Like the Sky

Heaven and Earth are not sentimental.
They treat all things like straw dogs.

The sage is not sentimental.
He treats the people like straw dogs.

The space between Heaven and Earth –
is it not like a bellows?
Empty, yet ever full.
The more it moves,
the more it yields.

Too many words exhaust the breath.
Hold to your centre.
Remain open and still.



Chapter 6

The Eternal Feminine

The valley spirit never dies.
It is called the mysterious feminine.

The gateway of the mysterious feminine
is the root of heaven and earth.

It flows forever,
soft and unceasing.
Use it gently,
and it will never run dry.



Chapter 7

Enduring by Letting Go

Heaven lasts long,
and Earth endures.

Why do they last so long?
Because they do not live for themselves.
That is why they can endure.

The sage puts himself last,
and finds himself first.
He lets go of self,
and is preserved.

Because he has no private agenda,
his true purpose is fulfilled.



Chapter 8

Like Water

The highest goodness
is like water.

Water nourishes all things
without trying.
It flows to the lowest places,
which others avoid –
and so it is like the Tao.

In living, choose a place well.
In thinking, stay still.
In relationships, be kind.
In speech, be true.
In leadership, be fair.
In work, be competent.
In action, be timely.

When you do not compete,
no one can fault you.



Chapter 9

The Wisdom of Enough

Better to stop
before the cup is full.
If you keep sharpening a blade,
it will soon become dull.

If gold and jade fill your house,
you can't protect it all.
If wealth and fame make you proud,
you invite misfortune.

Complete your task,
then step back.
This is the way of Heaven.



Chapter 10

The Subtle Power

Can you hold your body and soul together
and not let them drift apart?

Can you breathe gently,
like a newborn child?

Can you cleanse your inner vision
until nothing remains but clarity?

Can you love the people
and lead without control?

Can you open and close the gates of heaven,
like a mother bird,
without force?

Can you understand everything
without appearing to know?

The Tao gives birth to all things
and nourishes them.

It creates, but does not claim.

It acts, but does not boast.

It leads, but does not control.

This is the deep power of the Tao.



Chapter 11

The Use of Emptiness

Thirty spokes join at a hub,
but the use of the wheel
comes from the empty space between.

Clay is shaped into a pot,
but the use of the pot
is in its emptiness.

Doors and windows are cut into walls,
but the value of a room
is in the space inside.

So what is,
gives form.
What is not,
gives function.



Chapter 12

Beyond the Senses

Too many colours
blind the eye.

Too many sounds
deafen the ear.

Too many flavours
dull the tongue.

Chasing the hunt,
racing the chariot –
they disturb the mind.

Craving rare things
leads people astray.

So the sage nourishes the belly,
not the eye.

He lets go of desire,
and stays with what is real.



Chapter 13

Fear, Favour, and the Self

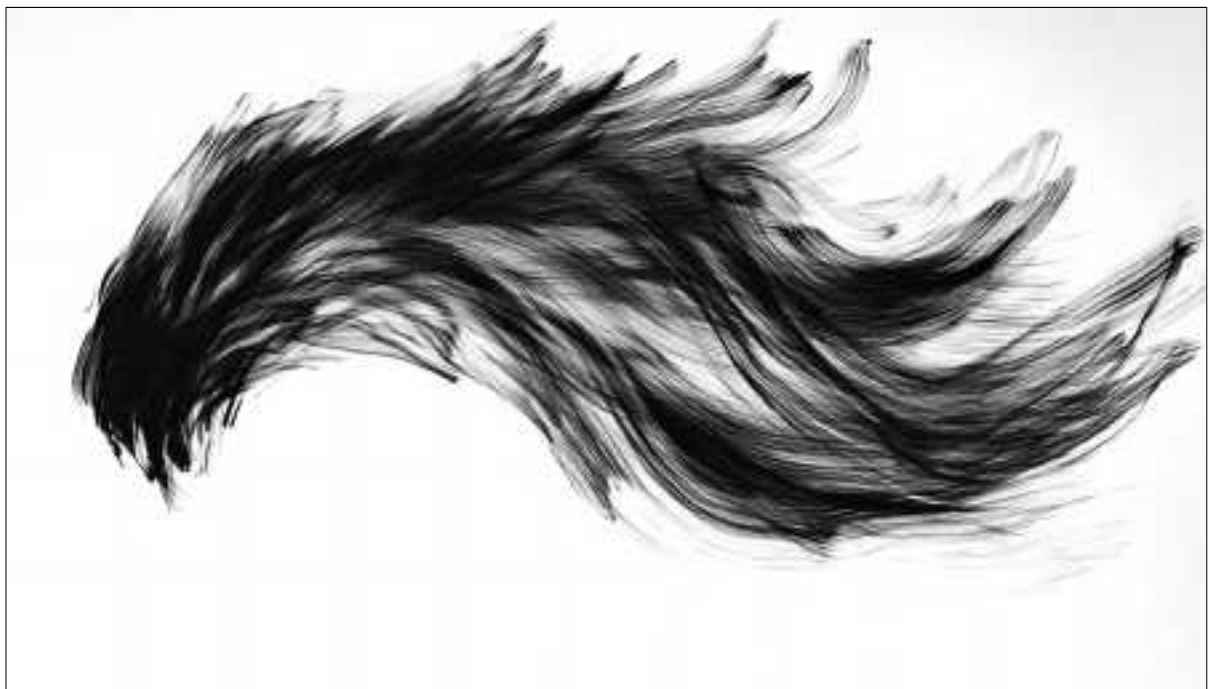
Favour and disgrace –
both bring fear.
Honour and calamity –
both come from caring too much about the self.

What does this mean?

To be favoured is to fear losing it.
To be disgraced is to already have lost it.
Both bind you to fear.

Why are honour and disaster alike?
Because they depend on the self.
If I had no self,
what misfortune could harm me?

So if you can care for the world
as you care for your own body,
you are worthy to lead.
If you love the world
as you love your own life,
you are fit to serve it.



Chapter 14

The Formless Way

Look for it – you cannot see it.
We call it the Invisible.
Listen for it – you cannot hear it.
We call it the Inaudible.
Reach for it – you cannot grasp it.
We call it the Subtle.

These three
cannot be fully described.
So we merge them into one –
The Tao.

Its upper part is not bright.
Its lower part is not dark.
It moves endlessly,
yet cannot be named.
It returns to nothing.

This is the shape of what has no shape,
the image of what cannot be seen –
fleeting, formless, beyond understanding.

Face it, you cannot see the front.
Follow it, you cannot see the back.

Yet, by holding to the Tao of old,
we can guide the present.
To know the beginning
is to hold the thread of the Way.



Chapter 15

The Sage Appears Like Water

The sages of old were subtle,
quiet, and deep.
Too deep to understand.
Because they were beyond knowing,
we can only describe how they appeared.

Cautious – like someone crossing a frozen stream.

Alert – like someone watching from all directions.

Respectful – like a guest before a host.

Fading – like melting ice.

Simple – like uncarved wood.

Open – like an empty valley.

Murky – like muddy water.

Who can make muddy water clear?

Let it settle,
and it becomes still.

Who can rest in movement?

By allowing things to flow,
stillness will come.

Those who follow the Tao

do not seek to be full.

Because they are empty,
they can be worn,
and yet never broken.



Chapter 16

Return to Stillness

Empty yourself completely.
Hold to quiet stillness.

All things rise and fall,
then return to their source.

Returning to the root
is stillness.
Stillness is returning
to what is real.

This return is the natural rhythm of life.
To understand this is wisdom.
Not understanding it
leads to chaos and confusion.

Knowing this rhythm
brings deep patience.
Patience leads to harmony with all things.
Harmony gives rise to true character.
True character becomes like the sky.
Being like the sky,
you are in touch with the Tao.
In the Tao, you endure.
You are whole until the end.



Chapter 17

The Quietest Leaders

The best leaders are those
the people barely know exist.

Next come those who are loved.
Then, those who are feared.
And after that,
those who are despised.

When trust is lacking,
there is no trust in return.

The wise rulers of old
were quiet and careful with their words.
They accomplished their task
and let things unfold.

And when all was done,
the people said,
“We did it ourselves.”



Chapter 18

The Rise of Pretence

When the Great Tao is forgotten,
morality and righteousness appear.

When cleverness emerges,
so does hypocrisy.

When family ties are no longer whole,
filial piety is praised.

When the state falls into chaos,
loyal ministers are admired.



Chapter 19

Return to Simplicity

Abandon wisdom and cleverness,
and the people will benefit a hundredfold.

Let go of morality and righteousness,
and people will rediscover kindness.

Give up profit and ambition,
and there will be no thieves or robbers.

These are mere decorations –
not true virtues,
but signs of what has been lost.

Better to return
to plainness and honesty,
to soften selfish desires
and live with less.



Chapter 20

Apart from the Crowd

Let go of learning,
and you'll be free of worry.

“Yes” and “yeah” may sound alike,
but the space between them can be vast.
What others fear, I too must fear –
yet endless questions only stir the mind.

Most people seem joyful,
as if feasting at a banquet,
or climbing a tower in spring.

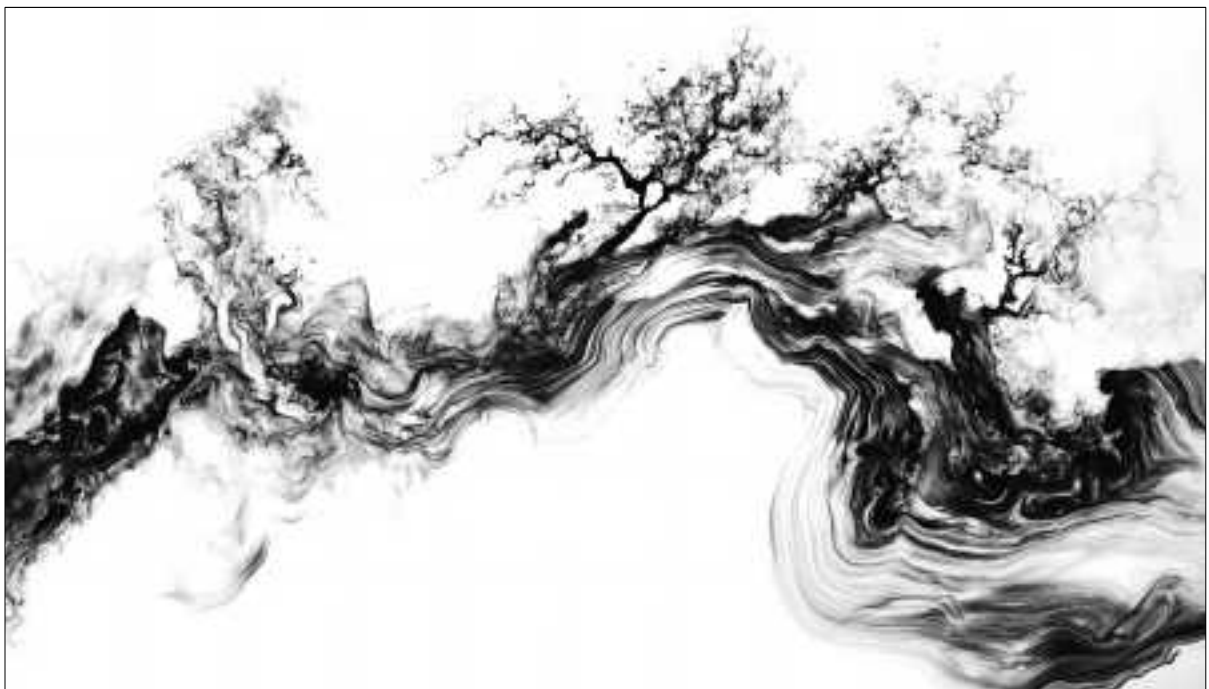
But I alone am still and quiet,
like a newborn that has not yet smiled.
I drift, as if I have no home.

Everyone else has more than enough.
I alone seem to have nothing.
My mind is dull – lost in confusion.

Others are bright and clever.
I alone appear dark and slow.
They are sure of themselves.
I move like the sea –
restless, without direction.

Everyone has a purpose.
I am like an outsider,
strange and simple.

But I am nourished by the Tao –
the great mother of all.



Chapter 21

The Shape of the Formless

The greatest power
comes from the Tao.
It is the source of all things.

But what is the Tao?
It cannot be seen.
It cannot be touched.

It hides within all forms,
yet escapes all senses.

Though invisible,
it gives rise to all things.
Though untouchable,
it shapes what is real.

It is deep, dark,
and beyond understanding.
Within it lies the essence
of everything that will be.

This truth is eternal.
The Tao does not fade.
From it, all things unfold —
each in its perfect time.

How do I know this is true?
Because I see the Tao in all things.



Chapter 22

Wholeness Through Yielding

What is broken becomes whole.
What is bent becomes straight.
What is empty becomes full.
What is worn becomes new.

Those who have little desire
are fulfilled.
Those with many desires
are lost.

So the sage embraces humility
and shows it to the world.

Because he does not show himself,
he shines.

Because he does not assert himself,
he stands out.

Because he does not boast,
he is respected.

Because he does not compete,
no one can compete with him.

The ancient saying,
“What is partial becomes complete,”
is not just words –
it holds the truth of the Way.



Chapter 23

The Power of Silence

To stay quiet
is to follow your true nature.

A strong wind does not last all morning.
A sudden rain does not last all day.
If even Heaven and Earth
cannot sustain force,
how can people?

Those who live by the Tao
move with its rhythm.
Those who act on it
find harmony in its flow.
Even those who fail
mirror its course in their failure.

To align with the Tao
is to share in its peace –
whether through success,
through striving,
or even through falling short.

But where there is no trust,
trust cannot grow.



Chapter 24

Standing Still

Those who stand on tiptoe
cannot stand firm.

Those who stretch too far
cannot walk with ease.

Those who show off
do not shine.

Those who speak only their own mind
are not respected.

Those who boast
gain no recognition.

Those who are self-important
have no true worth.

From the view of the Tao,
these are like leftover scraps —
or growths on the body.
Everyone finds them unpleasant.

That is why
those who follow the Way
avoid such things.



Chapter 25

The Great Way

There is something
formless and perfect,
born before Heaven and Earth.

Still.
Silent.
Alone.
Unchanging.

It flows everywhere
and never runs dry.
It may be called
the mother of all things.

I do not know its name,
but I call it Tao.
If I must name it further,
I call it Great.

Great flows outward.
Flowing outward, it becomes distant.
Becoming distant, it returns.

Therefore,
Tao is great.
Heaven is great.
Earth is great.
And the sage is great.

In the universe,
there are four great powers —
Tao, Heaven, Earth,
and the sage.

Man follows the Earth.
Earth follows Heaven.
Heaven follows the Tao.
And the Tao follows only itself.



Chapter 26

Rooted in Stillness

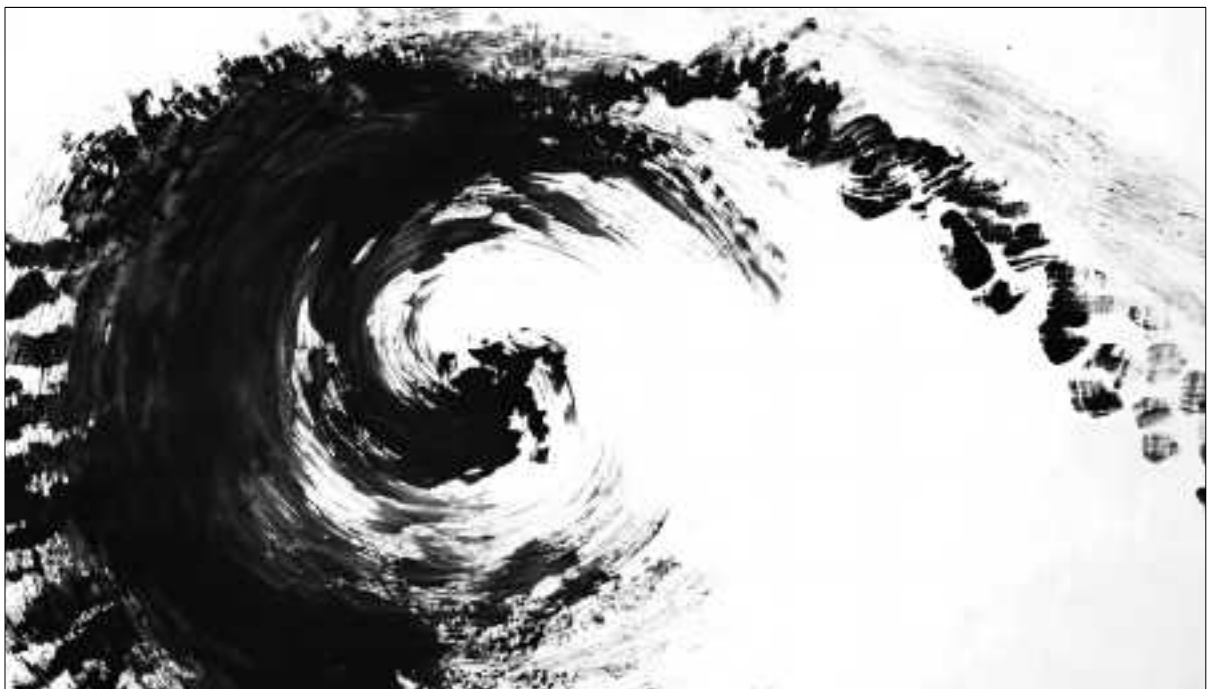
Gravity is the root of lightness.
Stillness is the master of movement.

That's why the wise leader,
even when travelling all day,
does not stray far from what grounds him.

Though he may see dazzling sights,
he stays calm and composed.

How can the ruler of a great kingdom
act with levity?

If he becomes restless,
he loses his foundation.
If he moves without restraint,
he loses his place.



Chapter 27

The Art of Subtle Skill

The master traveller
leaves no tracks.

The master speaker
leaves no words to dispute.

The master accountant
uses no tallies.

The master locksmith
needs no bolts,
yet no one can open what he has closed.

The master binder
uses no knots,
yet nothing can undo what he has joined.

The sage saves people
and never abandons them.

He cares for all things
and discards nothing.

This is called
“concealing the light of his way.”

The skilled guide is a teacher to the unskilled.

The unskilled are tools for the skilled.

If you do not honour your teacher,
and if you do not cherish those who assist you,
you may lose your way –
no matter how wise you seem.

This is the deepest mystery.



Chapter 28

Strength in Softness

Know your strength as a man,
but keep the softness of a woman.
Be the river where all streams meet.
In that low place,
you hold true power —
like a child, untainted and whole.

Know the light,
but stay in the dark.
Be a model of humility.
Seen by all,
yet clinging to the shade —
you return to your original nature.

Know honour,
but embrace disgrace.
Be the wide valley
welcoming all.
That is true greatness —
to return to the simplicity of a newborn.

Uncarved wood
can be shaped into anything.
The sage, when needed,
guides all
without force.



Chapter 29

Let Things Be

If you try to take control of the world,
you will fail.

The world is sacred –
not something to be seized.
To grasp it is to break it.
To force it is to lose it.

Things rise and fall,
advance and retreat,
grow strong and then weaken,
are full and then empty.
This is the natural way.

That is why the sage avoids extremes,
excess,
and indulgence.



Chapter 30

Without Force

One who follows the Tao
does not rule with weapons.

What is forced
always meets resistance.

Where armies go,
thorns and brambles grow.

After a great war,
bad years follow.

The wise commander
strikes only when necessary,
then stops.

He does not seek control.

He does not boast.

He does not take pride.

He does not dominate.

He acts from necessity —
never from the desire to conquer.

When things grow strong,
they soon begin to wither.
This is not the way of the Tao.

What goes against the Tao
cannot last.



Chapter 31

Weapons Are for Mourning

Weapons may be beautiful,
but they are tools of misfortune.
They are hated by all beings.
Those who follow the Tao
avoid using them.

The noble person values stillness.
In times of peace,
the left is honoured.
In times of war,
the right is given to the general –
the side of mourning.

Weapons are not for celebration.
They are used only when there is no other choice.
Victory is never cause for joy.
To celebrate killing
is to lose your place in the world.

In times of joy, we stand to the left.
In mourning, we stand to the right.
So too in war –
the general takes the place of sorrow.

Those who have taken many lives
should grieve deeply.
Even in victory,
one should stand in mourning.



Chapter 32

The Nameless Power

The Tao is eternal and nameless.

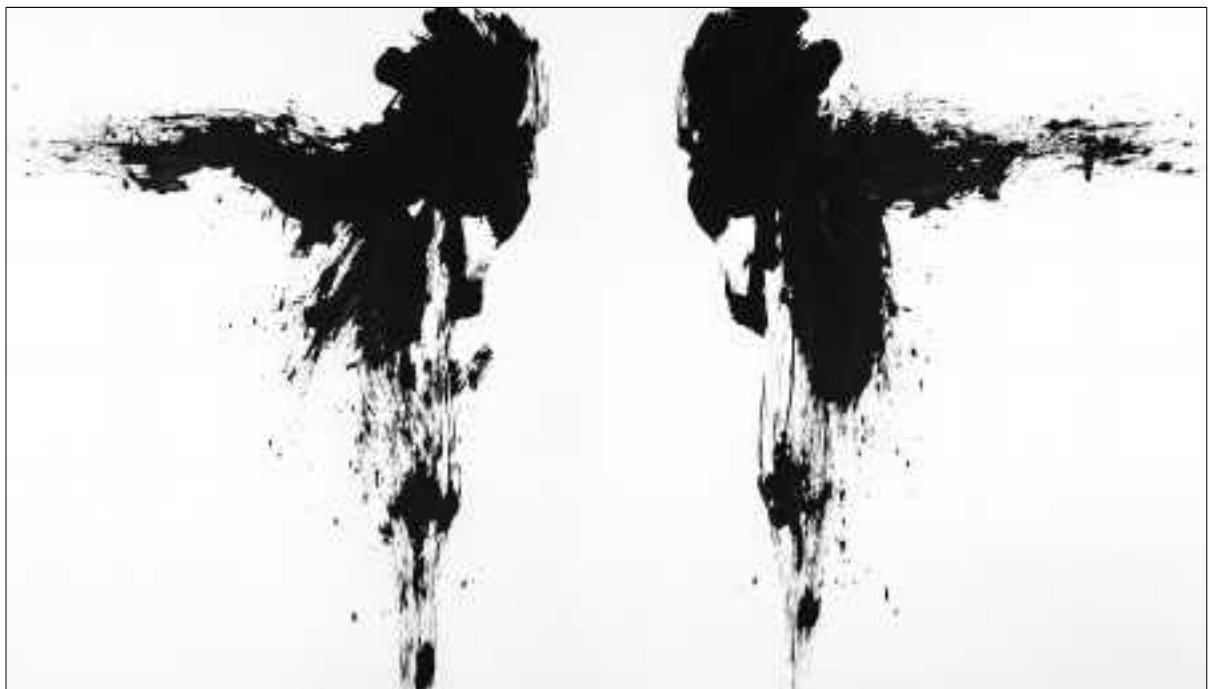
In its purest form, it seems small,
yet no one dares command one who lives in it.

If a ruler could hold to the Tao,
all things would follow naturally.

Heaven and Earth would unite,
and sweet dew would fall.
It would nourish all
without needing direction.

Once the Tao is named,
it becomes known.
Knowing it,
we can rest in it.
Resting in it,
we are free from mistakes.

The Tao is to the world
as oceans are to rivers –
the vast and silent place
to which all things return.



Chapter 33

True Strength

Knowing others is intelligence.
Knowing yourself is true wisdom.

Mastering others takes strength.
Mastering yourself takes true power.

Being content is wealth.
Staying steady is will.

Those who remain grounded in their role
endure.

Those who die
but are not forgotten –
they live on.



Chapter 34

The Quiet Presence

The Great Tao flows everywhere —
to the left and to the right.

All things arise from it,
yet it does not claim them.
It gives life,
but does not control.

It guides all things silently.
It wraps them like a garment,
yet makes no claim to be their master.

You can find it in the smallest things.
You can find it in the greatest.

Everything returns to it,
yet nothing realises
it is the source.

Because the sage follows the Tao,
he accomplishes great things
without making himself great.



Chapter 35

The Power of Presence

One who holds the Great Image of the Tao
attracts the whole world.

People come to him,
and feel no harm –
only peace, rest, and ease.

Music and fine food
may draw the traveller to stop,
but the Tao
seems tasteless,
without sound or form.

And yet,
its usefulness never ends.



Chapter 36

The Power of Reversal

To breathe in,
you must first breathe out.

To weaken something,
first support it.
To bring something down,
first lift it up.
To take from someone,
first give to them.

This is called
“concealing the light.”

The soft overcomes the hard.
The weak overcomes the strong.

Just as deep water hides the fish,
powerful tools for governing
should not be displayed.



Chapter 37

Effortless Harmony

The Tao does nothing,
yet nothing is left undone.

If rulers could embody it,
everything would transform
of its own accord.

If transformation became a desire,
it should be rooted
in nameless simplicity.

Simplicity without name
has no ambition.

Free of desire,
at rest,
everything moves as it should.



Chapter 38

The Decline of Virtue

Those who embody the Tao
do not show it –
and so they truly have it.

Those who try to hold it
do not have it fully.

The highest virtue does not act
and has no need to act.
Lesser virtue acts
and needs to act.

True benevolence acts without effort.
True righteousness must act deliberately.
Propriety acts with display –
and if ignored,
it resorts to force.

So when the Tao is lost, virtue appears.
When virtue is lost, benevolence appears.
When benevolence is lost, righteousness appears.
And when righteousness is lost, propriety appears.

Propriety is the shell of sincerity –
the beginning of chaos.
Cleverness is just a flower of the Tao –
it marks the start of foolishness.

The wise stay rooted in the real,
not the showy.
They care for the fruit,
not the flower.
They let go of surface,
and hold to substance.



Chapter 39

Rooted in the One

Since ancient times,
all things that endure
have held to the One.

Through the One:
Heaven remains clear. Earth stays firm.
Spirits have their power. Valleys remain full.
Creatures live and grow.
Rulers guide with balance.

All of this comes from the Tao.

If Heaven lost its clarity, it would collapse.
If Earth lost its firmness, it would crack.
Without the Tao,
spirits fade, valleys dry up,
life disappears.
Without it,
leaders fall from power.

What is high
rests on what is low.
Dignity is rooted in humility.

That is why rulers call themselves:
“the orphan,” “the unworthy,”
“a carriage without a wheel.”

They know that what is humble
supports what is great.

The parts of a carriage do not make it move —
it’s the emptiness within
that makes it useful.

The wise do not seek to shine like jade.
They remain grounded,
like common stone.



Chapter 40

Power Through Reversal

The Tao moves through reversal.
Its strength is found in softness.

All things in the world
come from being.
Being comes from non-being.



Chapter 41

The Hidden Tao

When the highest students hear of the Tao,
they practise it with devotion.

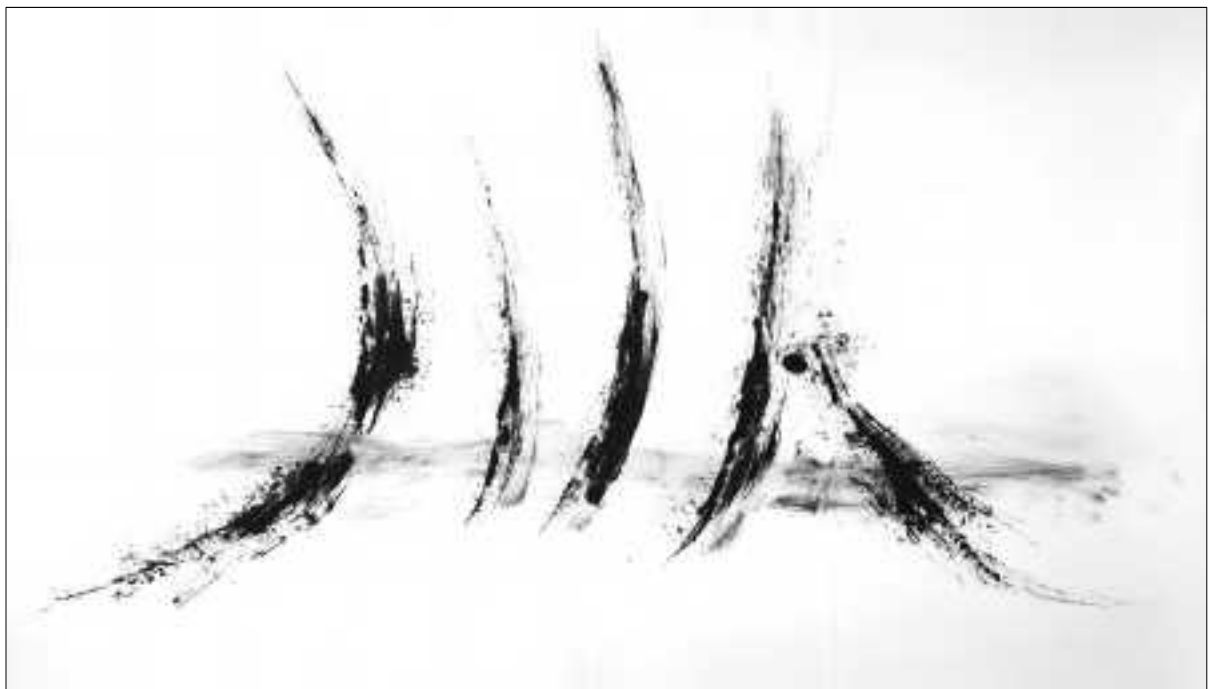
When average students hear of the Tao,
they keep it sometimes,
and lose it sometimes.

When the lowest students hear of the Tao,
they laugh out loud.
If it weren't laughed at,
it wouldn't be the Tao.

As the old sayings go:

The brightest Tao seems dim.
The one who advances appears to fall behind.
The smooth path looks uneven.
True virtue is hidden low.
Great beauty seems plain.
True wealth feels like having little.
Strong virtue seems weak.
Clear truth seems uncertain.
The greatest shape has no form.
The best vessel takes the longest to make.
The loudest sound is silent.
The grandest image is only a shadow.

The Tao is hidden
and without a name,
yet it gives all things what they need
and brings them to wholeness.



Chapter 42

The Pattern of the Tao

The Tao gave birth to One.
One gave birth to Two.
Two gave birth to Three.
Three gave birth to all things.

All things emerge from darkness
and move toward light,
held together
by the breath of emptiness.

People dislike being called
“orphan,”
“unworthy,”
or “a broken cart” —
yet these are the titles
used by kings and sages.

What is diminished
may increase.
What is increased
may be diminished.

This is also what I teach:
Those who use force
die before their time.
This is the root of my teaching.



Chapter 43

Power Without Force

The softest thing in the world
overcomes the hardest.

What has no form
enters where there is no space.

This shows the power
of doing without doing.

Few understand
the teaching that has no words,
or the strength
that comes from non-action.



Chapter 44

What Truly Matters

Which is more precious –
fame or life?

Which is more important –
life or wealth?

If you chase one,
you may lose the other.
Which loss brings more sorrow?

Those who cling to fame
let go of what truly matters.
Those who hoard wealth
lose the richness of life.

Be content,
and you'll avoid disgrace.
Know when to stop,
and you'll stay safe.
Live simply –
and you will live long.



Chapter 45

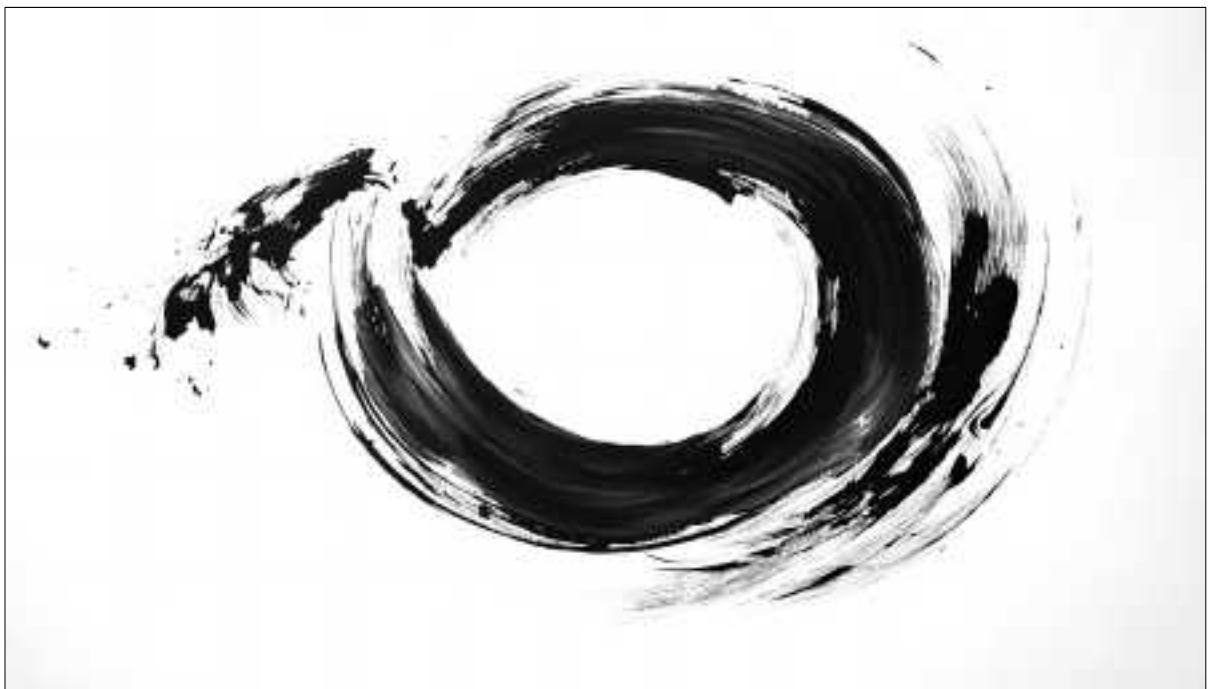
The Strength of Simplicity

Those who see their great achievements as small
will endure the longest.

What seems empty
is truly full –
never exhausted, never dry.

What is straight
may seem crooked.
What is skilful
may seem clumsy.
What is true eloquence
may sound like a stammer.

Movement overcomes cold.
Stillness overcomes heat.
Through calm and clarity,
the Tao brings balance to the world.



Chapter 46

Contentment Brings Peace

When the Tao is followed in the world,
war horses are put to work pulling carts of compost.

When the Tao is forgotten,
war horses breed at the borders.

There is no greater mistake
than fuelling ambition.
No greater curse
than discontent.
No greater fault
than the hunger for more.

To know contentment
is to have enough –
always,
and in all things.



Chapter 47

Seeing Without Leaving

Without leaving your house,
you can know the world.
Without looking through the window,
you can see the Tao of Heaven.

The farther you go,
the less you understand.

That's why the sages
know without travelling,
name things without seeing them,
and succeed
without striving.



Chapter 48

The Wisdom of Letting Go

The one who seeks learning
adds something new each day.

The one who follows the Tao
lets go of something each day.

Less and less,
until nothing is done –
yet nothing is left undone.

To gain the world,
let go of striving.
Those who chase it
will never catch it.



Chapter 49

The Heart of All People

The sage has no fixed opinions.
He holds the hearts of the people as his own.

To those who are kind, he is kind.
To those who are unkind,
he is also kind –
because kindness transforms.

To those who are sincere, he is sincere.
To those who are not,
he is still sincere –
because sincerity inspires.

The sage remains still and open,
free of judgement.
People look to him,
and he treats them all
like his own children.



Chapter 50

The Path Beyond Fear

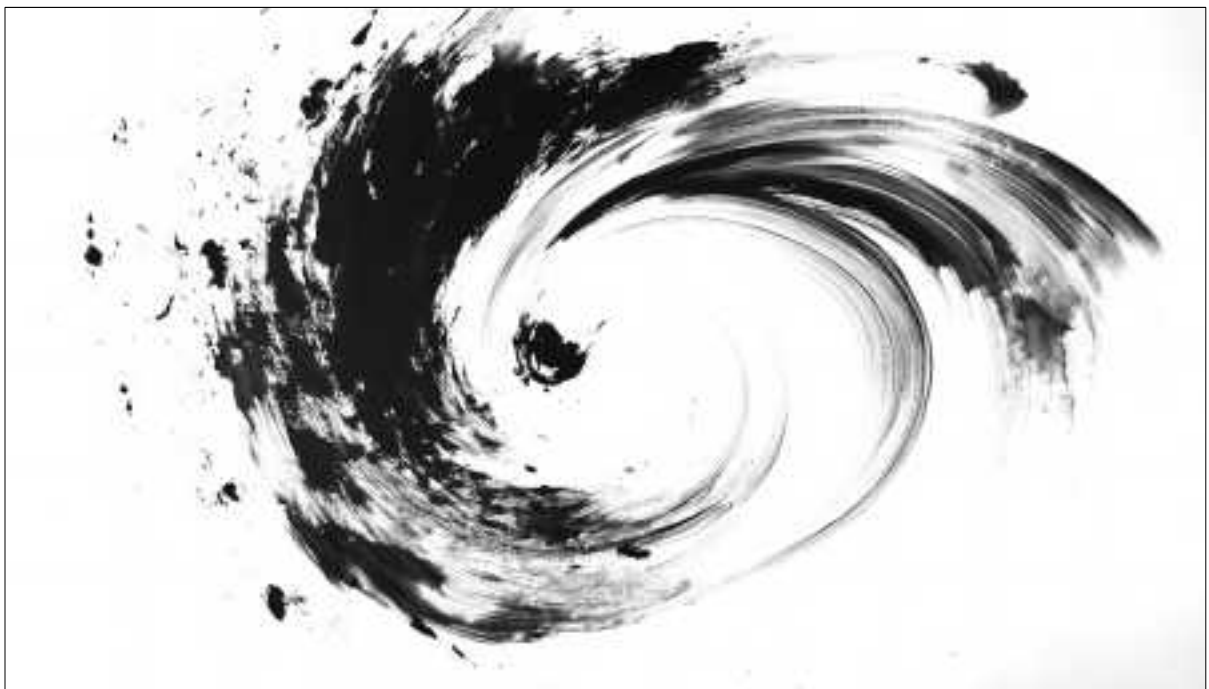
We are born, we live, we die.
Of every ten,
three cling to life,
three race toward death,
and three destroy themselves
trying too hard to avoid it.

Why?
Because they fear death
and fight life.

But one who lives with the Tao
walks through the world
without fear.

The tiger does not maul him.
The blade finds no place to cut.
The rhino turns away.

He carries no death within —
so nothing outside
can harm him.



Chapter 51

The Way that Mothers All Things

The Tao gives birth to all things.
Its power nourishes them.
Each takes shape according to its nature,
each completes its path in its own way.

Everything honours the Tao,
not by command,
but because it is life's quiet source.

The Tao brings forth,
nurtures, grows, supports,
guides, protects, and lets go.

It creates without claiming.
It acts without boasting.
It raises without ruling.

This is the deep mystery:
to do everything,
and yet not hold on.



Chapter 52

Return to the Mother

The Tao is the source of everything under heaven.
It is the Mother of all things.

When you know the Mother,
you understand the children.
Stay close to the Mother,
and you'll be safe your whole life.

Keep quiet.
Breathe gently.
Do not chase or force.
And you will know peace.

The smallest things hold the greatest clarity.
What is soft and subtle holds true strength.

Use your light with care.
Return to the source.
Let the eternal mystery remain hidden—
shining from within.



Chapter 53

The Gentle Path

If I were suddenly given power,
and asked to lead with the Great Tao,
my greatest fear would be pride—
the show of virtue instead of its practice.

The Tao is simple and smooth,
yet people chase side roads.
They love shortcuts, distractions, display.

Palaces are immaculate,
but the fields lie neglected.
Granaries are bare,
but robes are lavish and swords are sharp.
They eat richly, hoard wealth, flaunt excess.

Such rulers are thieves of the Way.
This is not the Tao.



Chapter 54

Roots That Hold

What is planted in Tao
cannot be uprooted.
What is embraced with Tao
cannot be lost.

Passed down through generations,
its strength becomes legacy.
When Tao is rooted in a person,
they become steady and true.
In a family, it brings harmony.
In a neighbourhood, it brings trust.
In a nation, it brings peace.
Across the world, it brings thriving.

Start with yourself—
and let the ripple grow.
How do I know it works this way?
By watching how it unfolds—
from the inside out.



Chapter 55

The Power of Innocence

One who is full of Tao
is like a newborn child.
Scorpions do not sting,
tigers do not attack,
eagles do not swoop.

Soft bones, gentle sinews—
yet the grip is strong.
No awareness of union,
yet essence flows naturally.
The baby cries all day
and never grows hoarse—
because it lives in perfect balance.

To live in harmony
is to know the Tao.
To know the Tao
is to see the eternal.
Pushing life too far,
forcing breath or strength—
this invites decay.

What grows rigid
is close to breaking.
What goes against the Tao
cannot last long.



Chapter 56

Those Who Know, Don't Speak

Those who know the Tao
do not talk about it.
Those who talk about it
do not know it.

Close your mouth,
shut the gates of sensation.
Soften what is sharp,
untangle what is knotted.
Dim the glare,
blend with the dust.

This is called
Mysterious Harmony.

One who lives this way
cannot be grasped—
not by friend or foe,
not by gain or loss,
not by status or shame.

He stands beyond comparison.
He is the most whole
under heaven.



Chapter 57

Lead Without Force

You can rule a country with laws.
You can win a war with cunning.
But to truly hold a kingdom,
you must do nothing on purpose.

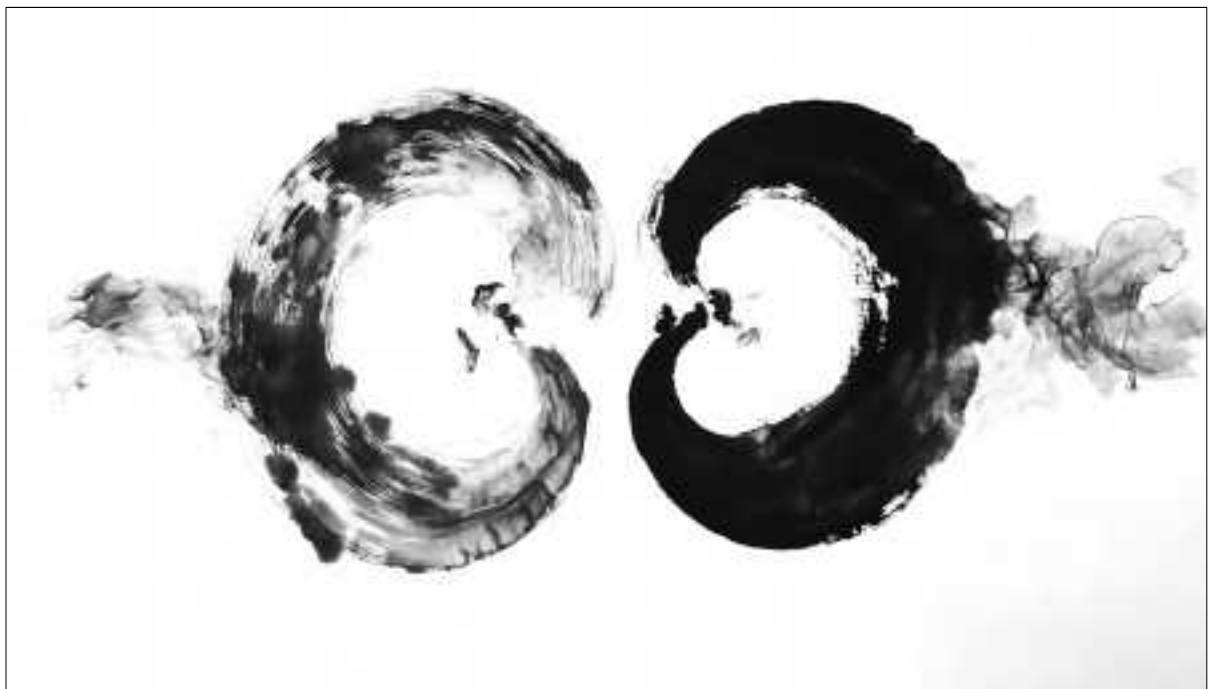
How do I know this?

Because:

The more laws you pass,
the poorer the people become.
The more clever inventions appear,
the more chaos unfolds.
The more tools to chase profit,
the more confusion and theft.
The more rules you impose,
the more rebels arise.

That's why the sage says:

“I do nothing, and the people transform.
I stay still, and the people align.
I avoid striving, and the people prosper.
I have no ambitions, and the people return to simplicity.”



Chapter 58

Hidden Opposites

When a government seems clumsy or loose,
it often brings peace and well-being.
When it interferes with everything,
it breeds unrest and pain.

Misery hides within happiness.
Happiness lies just beside misery.
Who can tell where one ends and the other begins?

Trying to fix things too tightly
leads to distortion.
What begins as good
can turn harmful.
People have long been blind to this truth.

So the sage stays soft—
a square with no sharp corners,
a light that doesn't dazzle.
He walks a straight path,
but doesn't force others to follow.



Chapter 59

Rooted in Restraint

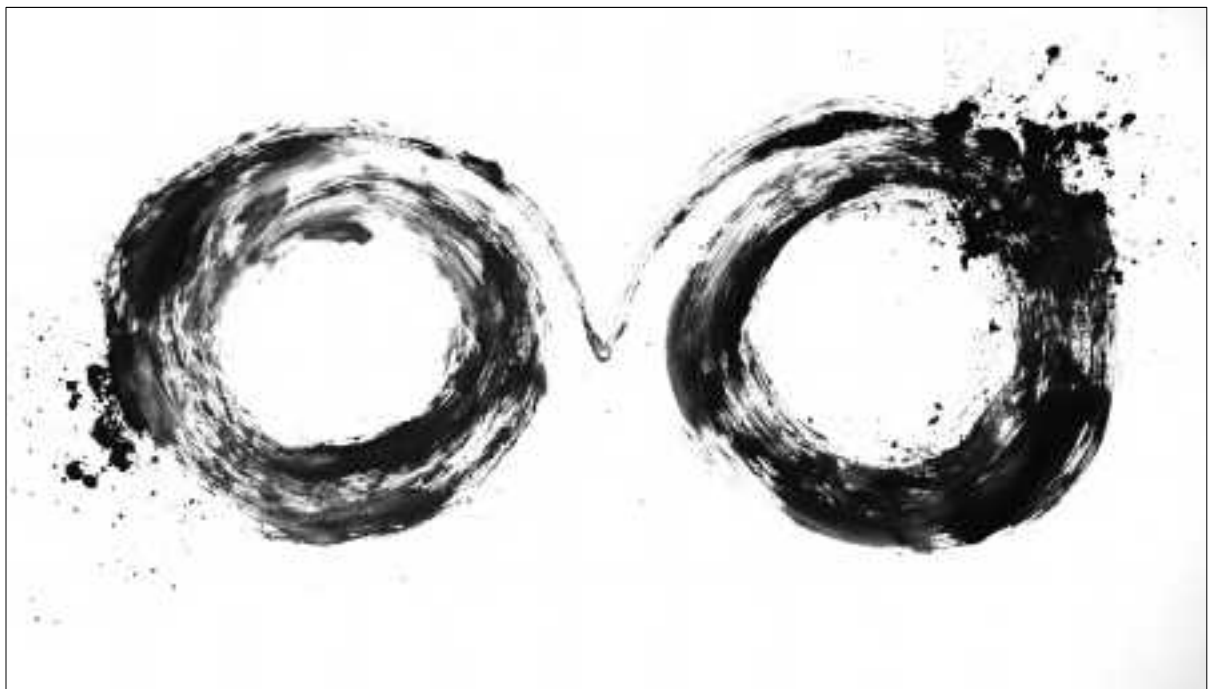
To guide human nature
and honour the divine,
nothing works like moderation.

Through moderation,
we return to our natural state.
This return builds strength quietly,
layer upon layer.

As strength accumulates,
obstacles fall away.
There is no telling how far one can go
when anchored in this way.

Such a person becomes fit to lead,
for they hold the essence of the state
like a gardener tends the root.

When the roots run deep,
the branches flourish.
When grounded in the Tao,
life endures.



Chapter 60

Gentle Hands, Great Power

Ruling a great nation
is like frying small fish—
too much stirring spoils it.

Let things unfold in the spirit of the Tao.
Even restless energies,
seen or unseen,
lose their sting.

It's not that danger disappears—
but with wisdom,
there's no invitation to harm.

The sage causes no injury,
and in turn,
receives none.

When human will and spirit world
don't clash,
their energies merge
in quiet virtue.



Chapter 61

The Power of Being Low

A great state is like a low riverbed—
quiet, receptive,
drawing all smaller streams to it.

In nature, the feminine overcomes the masculine
by being still,
by yielding.

So a great state,
by choosing humility,
wins over smaller ones.

And a small state,
by lowering itself,
finds shelter and favour
in the great.

In giving space,
each gets what it truly seeks.

Unity is born
when strength bows
and smallness trusts.



Chapter 62

The Refuge of All

The Tao is the treasure of the good
and the refuge of the flawed.

Beautiful words can earn honour.
Noble deeds can raise a person high—
but the Tao embraces even those who fall short.

When emperors rule
and ministers serve,
no gift—no chariot, no golden token—
equals a moment of true Tao
spoken sincerely,
offered humbly.

Why did the ancients treasure the Tao?
Because it is always there—
found by those who seek,
and forgiving of those who fail.

That is why the world holds it dear.



Chapter 63

The Power of Subtle Action

Act without striving.
Manage without meddling.
Taste without chasing flavour.

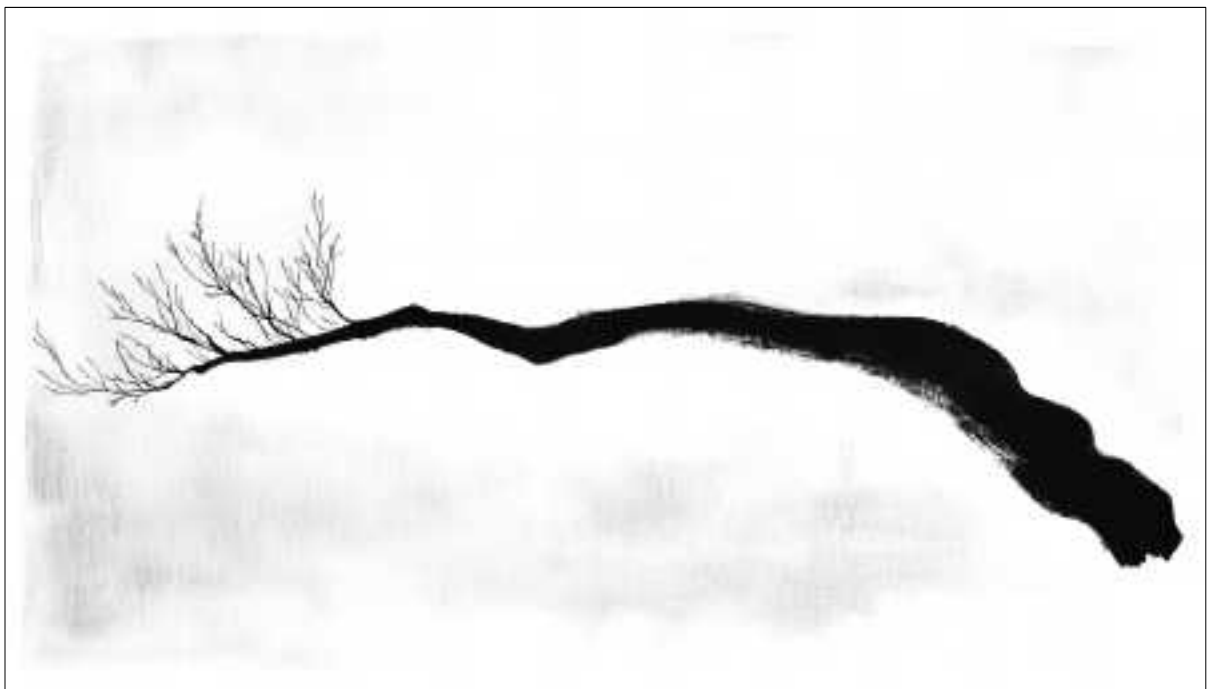
See the small as great,
and the few as many.
Return injury with kindness.

Begin the hard while it's still easy.
Do the great while it's still small.
All challenges start simple.
All greatness begins humbly.

So the sage never attempts the grand—
and thus achieves what is truly great.

Those who promise too much
keep too little.
Those who see ease in all
will stumble in hardship.

That's why the wise anticipate trouble
even in calm—
and so avoid being troubled at all.



Chapter 64

Begin Before It Begins

What is still is easy to hold.
What hasn't shown up is easy to guide.
What's fragile breaks with ease.
What's tiny scatters quickly.

Act before things arise.
Secure order before disorder begins.

A great tree grows from a tiny shoot.
A tall tower starts with a basket of earth.
A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step.

Grasp too tightly, and you'll lose your grip.
Force outcomes, and you'll cause harm.

The sage doesn't cling—
so nothing is lost.
He doesn't force—
so nothing is broken.

Most people fail when they are closest to success.
If they stayed steady at the end,
as they were at the start,
they wouldn't fall short.

The sage avoids chasing desire.
He values what others overlook.
He learns what others ignore.
He returns to the simplicity others forget.

And so, he helps all things grow—
without interfering.



Chapter 65

Lead Without Cleverness

Ancient sages didn't try to make people clever.
They helped them stay simple.

The more knowledge people chase,
the harder they are to govern.

Ruling with intellect alone brings harm.
Ruling without cunning brings peace.

This is the hidden virtue of leadership:
to act without appearing,
to guide without control.

It seems contrary to most—
but leads all to harmony.



Chapter 66

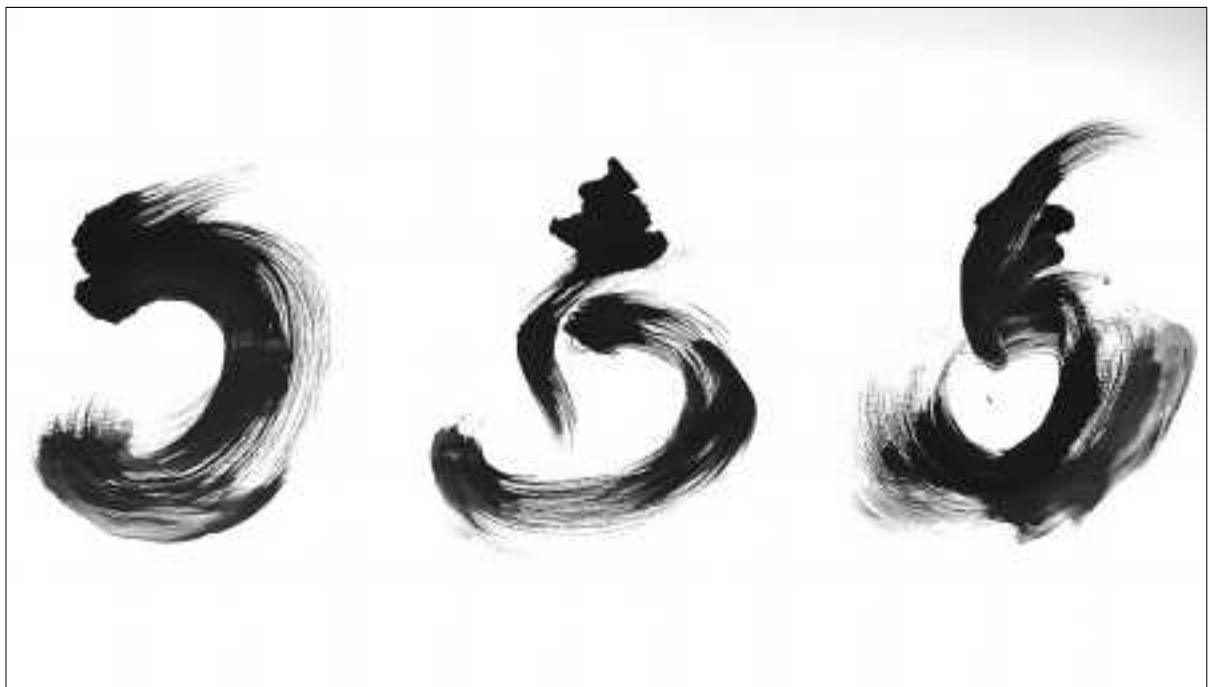
The Power of Being Low

Why are rivers and seas kings of the valleys?

Because they stay low—
they lie beneath,
and so all streams flow to them.

In the same way,
the sage stays beneath the people.
He speaks humbly,
stands behind,
and leads without pressing forward.

He rises without burdening,
guides without boasting.
People lift him up
and never tire of him—
because he never competes,
no one competes with him.



Chapter 67

The Three Treasures

The world says my Tao is vast,
but looks like nothing special.

That's the wonder of it—
because it's not like the rest,
its greatness remains unseen.

I carry three treasures close to heart:

Gentleness,
Simplicity,
Humility.

With gentleness, I can be truly strong.

With simplicity, I can give freely.

With humility, I rise without pushing forward.

But now the world rejects these—

bold without kindness,
extravagant without need,
rushing to be first,
they race toward ruin.

Yet gentleness endures.

Even in battle,
it triumphs without harm.
Heaven shields the soft-hearted—
not with force,
but through their yielding.



Chapter 68

The Mastery of Yielding

The greatest warrior
does not boast.
He carries no anger,
seeks no glory,
keeps his distance
even in victory.

He leads without force.
Commands are fulfilled—
not through power,
but quiet influence.

He contends with none,
and none can contend with him.
By yielding,
he aligns with all.

This is true strength—
like Heaven,
subtle, guiding,
undeniably bright.



Chapter 69

The Wisdom of Not Fighting

The true master of battle
does not begin one.

He would rather retreat a step
than advance an inch.

He moves without form,
strikes without weapons,
confronts without enemies.

This is the subtle strategy:
To yield before conflict begins,
to dissolve the battle
before it takes shape.

There is no greater misfortune
than rushing into war.

To do so is to lose
the gentleness most precious.

So when weapons clash,
the one who grieves
will win.



Chapter 70

Hidden in Plain Sight

My words are simple—
easy to understand,
easy to live.

Yet no one seems to understand,
and fewer still live them.

There is a source behind what I say,
a law beneath the surface.
But people do not see it—
and so, they do not see me.

Few recognise what I carry.
And for that reason,
I am precious.

The sage walks in rough cloth,
but carries hidden jade
close to his heart.



Chapter 71

The Illness of Certainty

To know,
yet think you do not know—
this is clarity.

To not know,
yet think you do—
this is sickness.

Only those who feel the pain of this sickness
can be healed by it.
The sage feels this pain—
and so is free.



Chapter 72

Reverence for Life

When people no longer fear
what is worthy of fear,
disaster descends.

Do not live
as if life were a burden.
Do not treat the body
as something cheap.

Honour your breath.
Value your being.

The sage sees clearly—
but does not flaunt.
He loves himself—
but holds no pride.

He chooses humility
over display,
substance
over show.



Chapter 73

The Quiet Power of Heaven

Some are bold in defiance—
and meet their end.

Some are bold in restraint—
and endure.

One seems to win,
the other to lose...

But who truly understands
the working of Heaven?

The sage hesitates to judge.

Heaven does not strive—
yet nothing can resist it.

It says nothing—
yet all things answer.

It does not command—
yet all return to it.

Its movements are still,
its plans precise,
its justice vast.

The net of Heaven is wide—
its weave loose and open—
yet nothing ever slips through.



Chapter 74

The Great Carpenter

If people do not fear death,
what use is it to threaten them with it?

Even if you punish with death,
would it truly stop wrongdoing?

There is One who rules over life and death.
To step into that role—
to kill in place of the Tao—
is like cutting wood in the place of a master carpenter.

And those who grab the axe
without the skill
often wound themselves in the swing.



Chapter 75

The Cost of Rule

Why is there famine?
Because rulers take too much.
The people are taxed into hunger.

Why are people hard to govern?
Because rulers interfere too much.
Over-control breeds resistance.

Why do people treat death lightly?
Because life is too hard.
The labour of living
makes dying seem like rest.

Thus, the more you value life,
the less you should cling to it.
Let it flow—
not be forced.



Chapter 76

Strength and Stillness

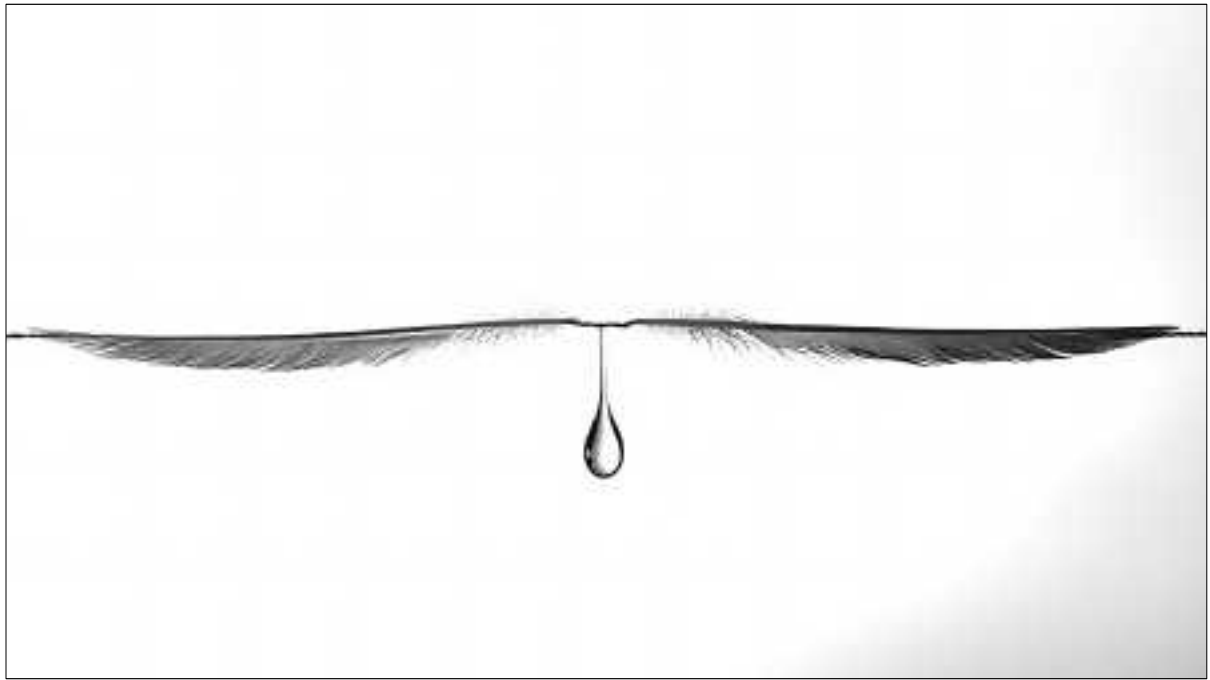
At birth, we are soft and tender.
At death, we are stiff and unyielding.
So too with trees and plants—
 alive, they bend;
 dead, they snap.

Hardness is the companion of death.
Softness is the companion of life.

The mighty fall because they resist the wind.
The gentle endure because they yield to it.

What is rigid may appear strong,
 but it breaks.
What is supple may seem weak,
 but it survives.

Thus,
 place strength below.
Let softness rise above.



Chapter 77

The Bow of Heaven

The Way of Heaven—
is it not like drawing a bow?

The high is pulled down.
The low is lifted up.
Excess is reduced.
Lack is replenished.

Such is Heaven's Way:
to balance what's uneven.
But the way of man?
He takes from the poor
and gives to the rich.

Who, then, will offer their surplus
to serve the whole world?
Only one who walks the Way.

The sage gives without claiming.
He completes without boasting.
He does not seek to shine.



Chapter 78

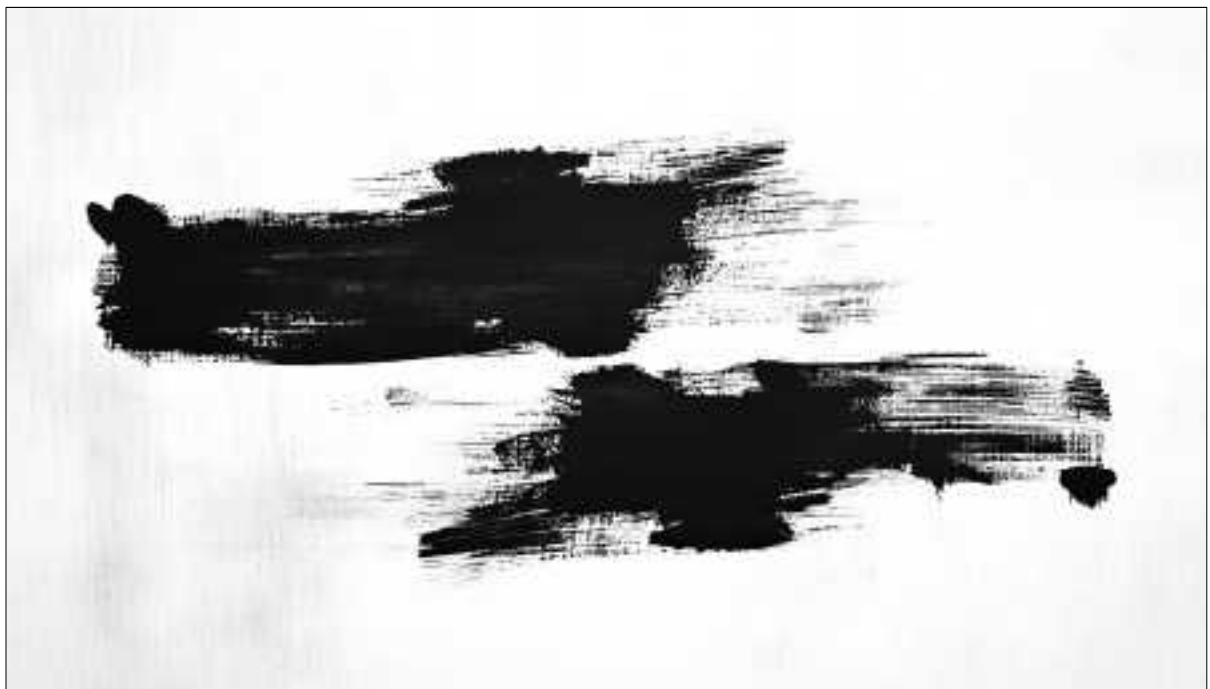
The Power of Water

Nothing in the world is softer than water.
Yet nothing is better at overcoming the hard and strong.
Nothing can take its place.

Everyone knows
the soft conquers the hard,
the weak prevails over the strong—
yet few live this truth.

So the sage said:
“He who takes on the world’s disgrace
becomes the guardian of its sacred altars.
He who bears the weight of sorrow
is called the true ruler of the people.”

True words often seem like contradictions.



Chapter 79

The Lingering Grudge

After great conflict, reconciliation may come—
but a wound still aches.
Grudges remain, even when peace is signed.
How can this serve harmony?

The sage takes the lesser share.
He holds to his side of the agreement
without forcing the other to fulfil theirs.

Those rooted in the Tao honour the whole,
not just their gain.
Those without it,
demand what favours them.

Heaven plays no favourites.
Its justice always aligns
with what is truly good.



Chapter 80

The Simple Life

Imagine a small country,
with few people and little ambition.
Though capable, no one is pressured to achieve.
Though life is precious, no one fears death.

They have boats—but don't sail.
Weapons—but don't use them.
They write not with pens, but with knotted cords.

They find sweetness in simple meals,
beauty in plain clothes,
peace in modest homes,
joy in familiar ways.

A neighbouring village may be close—
roosters and dogs heard across the fields—
yet people grow old and die
without needing to go there.



Chapter 81

Without Striving

Truthful words are not always beautiful.
Beautiful words are not always true.
Those who know do not argue.
Those who argue do not know.

The wise do not hoard.
The more they give,
the more they have.
The more they serve,
the more they gain.

The Tao cuts sharp—yet never wounds.
The sage acts with quiet strength—
and never competes.