

# **TAO TE CHING**

**Alexander Ular's German  
Translation  
translated into English**



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**Tao Te Ching**  
Die Bahn und der Rechte Weg des Lao-Tse  
Der chinesischen Urschrift nachgedacht von Alexander Ular  
First published 1903

The Path and the Right Way of Lao-Tse  
Re-conceived after the Chinese Original by Alexander Ular  
English translation

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A Dunyazad Digital Library book  
Selected, translated, edited and typeset by Robert Schaechter  
First published May 2026  
Release 1.1 · June 2026

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The *Tao Te Ching* is a Chinese philosophical text from the middle of the first millennium BCE, ascribed to Lao Tse.

Apart from the Bible the *Tao Te Ching* is the most often translated book in history — in major Western languages, including English, the numbers of its translations far exceed those of the Bible.

Anyone who has ever concerned themselves with the *Tao Te Ching* agrees that it contains a wealth of most profound wisdoms and truths. No two people, though, seem to agree on what these truths and wisdoms are.

When you compare different translations, they can diverge to such a degree that it can be difficult to accept that they indeed refer to the same original. Much of this is due to the individual translators' agendas — they use the text as a canvas on which to project their own expectations, as a mirror in which they see their own thoughts reflected. Much of it, though, is due to the actual opaqueness and ambiguity of the Chinese text, though we do not know how much of this may be intentional and how much of it comes from the absence of punctuation in ancient Chinese which allows sentences to be read differently — the way that in English *give not take* could be read as *give, not take!* or as *give not, take!* To the contemporary ancient Chinese reader the meaning may, or may not, have been obvious, or they may have appreciated the ambiguities.

Add to this the fact that Chinese is very different from Indogermanic languages, that characters and words have changed their meanings in two and a half millennia, and that little of the context in

which they were written is known, and you will get an idea of why it is impossible to come up with a “true” translation of the *Tao Te Ching* — but we still need the attempts.

## The German Translation by Alexander Ular

Alexander Ular’s German translation was first published by Insel Verlag in 1903 under the title *Die Bahn und der Rechte Weg des Lao-Tse. Der Chinesischen Urschrift nachgedacht von Alexander Ular.*

Ular’s German in this work is highly idiosyncratic and artificial, full of words that do not exist outside of this text, some of them expressive, some obscure. Whether this brings the German text closer to the original I am not able to say, but this is what I found in my teens on my parents’ bookshelves, and the impression it made on me those many years back has never left me.

The Dunyazad Digital Library also has an edition of this text that includes Alexander Ular’s German and French translations, and an English translation of his French translation.

You can download a scan of the German Insel-Bücherei edition in PDF format from archive.org:

<https://dn720006.ca.archive.org/0/items/diebahnun00laoz/diebahnun00laoz.pdf>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Lao Tse

The *Tao Te Ching* was probably created around the middle of the first millennium BCE, or major parts of it were, allegedly by Lao Tse (Laozi), about whom nothing is known at all apart from some legends. The name means Old Master, which could be the honorific of an actual person, but could also be a generic term. In his afterword Alexander Ular writes that “we know that he has lived and that the tiny colossal work that carries his name has been thought up and written down by a single human” — but alas, we do not know even this.

### Alexander Ular

Alexander Ular was a German journalist, sinologist, and writer, who today is best known for his German translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, but who was also the author of several monographs on Russia and China, of two novels, and of the text *Politics*.

Surprisingly little can be found about his life — not more than that his real name was Alexander Ferdinand Uhlemann, that he was born in Bremen in 1876, that he lived in France for a time, that his political views could be described as anarcho-syndicalist, and that he died in Morocco in 1919.

## ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

This is my attempt at an English translation of the German translation of the Tao Te Ching by Alexander Ular, from 1903.

While in the afterword to his German translation Ular promises clarity, the text is not easy to read, the language is idiosyncratic, sometimes seems deliberately obscure, and is extremely difficult to translate — his earlier French translation uses much plainer language. Which of them comes closer to representing the Chinese original I am not able to decide, but to me it is and has always been the German text that deeply fascinates me, and that I had long wanted to translate.

While I am of course aware of many other translations of the *Tao Te Ching* that exist I have deliberately not used them, but strictly stayed with Ular's German text — only in a few rare cases I have drawn on his French translation to clarify the meaning of a word or a phrase.

When translating it is important not to give in to the constant temptation to ask, instead of “what could the author have meant to say,” “what should the author have meant to say?” — instead of translating the text to find an idea that would be easier to express, that would appear to make more sense, or that might actually make more sense. But also, not to choose a seemingly obvious translation for a sentence or a word when this could be easily translated back to something the author had *not* chosen to write. My intention, which I have followed as well as I could, was to translate Ular's German text faithfully (with one exception, see “Gender”), independent of what I think about it and even where his highly idiosyncratic language makes translating nearly impossible.

## Tao Te Ching

*Ching* (which does not appear in the text) more or less means *book* — *Tao Te Ching* can be translated as *The Book of the Tao and the Te*.

*Te*, as is generally agreed upon, denotes the rules which humans are advised to follow — it has been translated as *goodness*, *virtue*, or *power*, Ular translates it as *der Rechte-Weg* (the Right-Way) or, in his earlier French translation, as *la Ligne-droite* (the Straight-line). While *goodness* and *virtue* make it a decidedly moral category, the text rather suggests both a moral and a pragmatic guideline for human behavior, which are not understood as being in conflict with each other.

*Tao*, on the other hand, describes the lines along which the Universe operates, the eternal principles that guide it, the rules that apply to it. *Tao* and *Te* are interwoven and complement each other. Understanding the *Tao* will help people to follow the *Te*, for their own and for their communities' benefit. In our languages there exists no word for *Tao* — often it is translated as *the Way*, but often it is simply left untranslated.

Alexander Ular's German word for *Tao* is *Bahn*, which is a common enough German word, but has no English equivalent.<sup>1</sup> To distinguish it from the *Right-Way* for *Te*, in my translation I call it *the Path*.

Elusive as the *Tao* is, one thing it is not: a religious concept. Taoism as a religion has no foundation in the *Tao Te Ching*, nowhere in the text are there any references to any supernatural beings or ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> A physical or theoretical line along which objects move steadily with little or no resistance — as in *Eisenbahn* (railroad), *Flugbahn* (flight trajectory), *Umlaufbahn* (orbit) etc., but also *Gedankenbahn* (train of thought).

## Gender

The German language knows what is called the “generic masculine” which has recently come into discredit, but was uncontroversially used until at least the late 20th century.

For most nouns that denote persons German does not have a gender-neutral form as it usually exists in English, nor does it have a gender-neutral article for persons.

*The teacher* is *der Lehrer* or *die Lehrerin*, *the Wise* is *der Weise* or *die Weise*, according to their masculine or feminine gender.

“Generic masculine” means that the male form is (or rather, was) seen as automatically including both male and female persons.

In English *the teacher*, *the Wise* or *the Perfect One* can be either male or female, but the personal pronouns still distinguish between the genders.

Ular used, as was a matter of course, the masculine form, which necessarily included masculine pronouns.

In English, rendering this in a gender-neutral way would either need an abundance of the rather confusing *they*, or a lot of *he or she*, *his or her*, *himself or herself* etc., which would make the text quite unreadable.

I have therefore, without any further justification, decided to consistently use female pronouns, where it did not seem a good idea to avoid the problem by using the plural. Alexander Ular did not use female forms or pronouns, or seemed to have given any thoughts to gender issues.

Using a generic feminine is simply my way to avoid the generic masculine.

## Notes

1. The Dunyazad Library also has an edition of this text that includes Ular's original German and French translations, and my translation of Ular's French translation.

2. Ular's highly idiosyncratic densely packed German serves a purpose: to slow reading down, and make the reader ponder each word and each line. This is more difficult to achieve in English, but the text needs to be read slowly.

3. This is a philosophical text, but also it is poetry, and should be read as such. Also, it helps to read it repeatedly.

4. Finding deep wisdom in Lao-Tse's words (or in Ular's translation) does not necessarily mean to agree with everything he said.

*R.S.*

# THE FIRST BOOK

## 1. THE FIRST SAYING

The Path of Paths is not the ordinary path;  
The Name of Names is not the ordinary name.  
Unnameability is the nature of the All-That-Is;  
Nameability is the emergence of the specific.

Although: clearly sees who sees from afar,  
and hazily who is involved.

This twofold fundamental essence is one,  
twofold contradiction only in appearance.

It is the unfathomable,  
the unfathomable depth,  
the door to the ultimate mystery.

## 2. THE SECOND SAYING

Human judgment of beauty divided ugly from beautiful;

Human judgment of goodness divided bad from good;

Being and not-being is substance divided;

Possible and impossible is senses divided;

Large and small is spatiality divided;

High and low is order divided;

Tone and noise is sound divided;

Before and after is continuity divided.

And so:

The Perfect One lives without purpose,

directs without words,

acts without urge,

creates without object,

devises without aim,

effects without activity.

Inherently:

The unknown is a spawning force.

### 3. THE THIRD SAYING

Excess of intervention is source of belligerence;

OVERRATING OF RARITY IS SOURCE OF SINFULNESS;

Excessive pride in luxury is source of resentment.

And so:

The Perfect One rules free from partiality,

far from prejudice,

rarely wavering,

strong of nature.

She leads the people free of learning and desire,

placates the knowledge-beguiled,

avoids doing.

Thus swings, unhindered, the wheel of the community.

#### 4. THE FOURTH SAYING

The Path is without substance, but inexhaustibly effects;  
Unfathomably, it keeps the nature of all things in balance.

It blunts what is sharp,  
clarifies what is confused,  
softens what glares,  
orders all matter.

Unquenchable light!

Who could possibly be creator, who father  
Of this Supreme!

## 5. THE FIFTH SAYING

The All-That-Is does not know love;  
It passes over the particular as if it were a means.  
The Perfect One does not know love;  
She passes over the individuals as if they were means.  
    The Universe resembles a blowing bellows,  
        empty and inexhaustible,  
        in motion, unceasingly creating.  
Humans,  
    inexhaustible of words,  
    lose nothing of their selves.

## 6. THE SIXTH SAYING

The living force of creation is everlasting,

She is the inconceivable mother.

The inconceivable mother is the root of the Universe,

Steadily weaving, she does not need an impetus.

## 7. THE SEVENTH SAYING

Everlasting is the All-That-Is;

Everlasting, because it exists not as particular:

Here lies the condition for everlastingness.

And so:

The Perfect One, dissipating, reveals herself,  
squandering herself, gains eternal existence,  
losing herself, becomes her particular self.



## 9. THE NINTH SAYING

One cannot hold and fill at the same time;

One cannot sharpen and feel at the same time;

Once cannot possess and preserve at the same time.

Selfishness, unbridled, begets sin.

To effect, to accomplish, living in insignificance:

This is the Path.

## 10. THE TENTH SAYING

Dominion of the soul over the mind, that is their continual  
convergence, leads them to oneness;  
Self-education, that is striving to adapt, leads to simplicity;  
Purification, that is broadening of judgment, leads to excellence;  
Sense of reciprocity, as foundation of the community,  
leads it to self-regulation;  
Changes in fortune lead to receptiveness;  
True insight leads to futility of knowledge.  
Being furtherer of development:  
to create and not to possess,  
to effect and not to gain,  
to overgrow and not to overwhelm:  
This is the Path.

## 11. THE ELEVENTH SAYING

Thirty spokes meet the hub,

but the void between them effects the essence of the wheel;

Pots are made from clay,

but the void within them effects the essence of the pot;

Walls with windows and doors form the house,

but the void within them effects the essence of the house.

Inherently:

The material holds usability;

The immaterial effects essentiality.

## 12. THE TWELFTH SAYING

Excessive brightness dulls the sense of sight;  
Excessive loudness dulls the sense of hearing;  
Excessive flavor dulls the sense of taste;  
Excessive passion for games dulls the comprehension;  
Excessive desire dulls the ability.

And so:

The Perfect One wins for the self the not-self,  
does not lose the self to the not-self,  
eschews the one,  
seeks the other.

### 13. THE THIRTEENTH SAYING

Mercy demeans like disgrace;  
Honor weighs down like the body.

What means:

Mercy demeans like disgrace?

Mercy becomes possible through self-subordination,  
is achieved through self-debasement,  
becomes, when forfeited, disgrace.

What means:

Honor weighs down like the body?

The body is bearer of all weights,  
necessarily where heaviness takes hold.

And so:

Who keeps their distance, as from the body, from the community,  
leads it right;

Who extinguishes affection, as for the body, so for the community,  
leads it well.

#### 14. THE FOURTEENTH SAYING

The senses seek but do not see: the indiscernible;

The senses harken but do not hear: the imperceptible;

The senses grope but do not detect: the immaterial.

This threefold non-sense is, because non-sense, indistinguishable;

The mind therefore conceives it as one:

All-comprising,

Eternally indeterminable,

Spreading into the universal,

Shapeless shape,

Intangible manifestation,

Indissectable, unsubsumable,

Without beginning, without end.

And so: to trace the Path, once comprehended,

means to map it once for everyone;

Because it can be done to understand its course:

*Development out of itself.*

## 15. THE FIFTEENTH SAYING

The Ancients, Masters, had reasoning, insight, intuition;  
Remaining unaware of this mental strength;

The unawareness of their inner strength gave them grandness.

Cautious like one who in winter traverses a river,

Vigilant like one who fears enemies all around,

Cold like the stranger,

Retreating like melting ice,

Rough like unpolished wood,

Wide like the valley basin,

Inscrutable like muddy waters.

Who among the present ones could, by their own clarity's grandness,  
clarify the inner darkness?

Who among the present ones might, by their own life's grandness,  
revive the inner death?

In them was the Path; they became detached and rulers of themselves;  
And perfection they discerned in their deficiency.

## 16. THE SIXTEENTH SAYING

Beyond the particular resides the immutable perpetual;  
In the individual's life there alternate ebb and flow;  
Circular movement!

The cycle is the immutable perpetual:

The perpetual is the eternal equability of creation:

The equability of creation is the essential nature of life.

Awareness of the nature of life is serene clarity;

Unawareness of the nature of life is confused opacity.

Awareness of the nature of life brings forth detachment:

Detachment brings forth superiority:

Superiority brings forth mastery:

Mastery brings forth sublimeness:

Sublimeness leads into the Path:

The Path is the All-That-Is,

The immutable perpetual.

## 17. THE SEVENTEENTH SAYING

The first Custodians of the community were envisioned;  
Those who followed were loved and praised;  
Those who followed were feared;  
Those who followed were despised:  
Sense of reciprocity alone creates community.  
Those, as mighty as their momentous words, fulfilled their task:  
Presumed self-organization the community enjoyed.

## 18. THE EIGHTEENTH SAYING

The Path was lost — need for judgment arose;

Dominion of judgment was born —

naturalness of customs disappeared.

Primal unity of blood-ties disrupted — kinship duties emerged;

Primal union of the community ruptured —

division of nations ensued.

## 19. THE NINETEENTH SAYING

Disregard of sense of knowledge, disdain of compulsion:  
and wellbeing grows a hundredfold in the community;

Disregard of sense of duty, disdain of obligations:  
and sense of reciprocity is reborn in the community;

Disregard of sense of purpose, disdain of desire:  
and reveling in sinfulness dies down in the community.

Such threefold principle can not be met through appearance;

It needs the essence:

To seem genuine — to be detached.

To seem unselfish — to be selfless.

## 20. THE TWENTIETH SAYING

Rationality is destruction of life.

Contraposition in resolve — how insignificant;

Contraposition in doing — how powerful!

Doing like all the world does! ... Duty born from reason!

No! Sinful insanity!

All the world is easily carried off by superficial pleasure:

    a holiday, a spring night ...

I, though, anchoring deep at the bottom of the flow of emotions,  
    am cheerful and serene in my joy like a child.

I live and I weave ... on and on ...

All the world desires the all-to;

I, though, desire nothingness,

I am awkward in life, lack sense of purpose! ...

All the world knows;

I, though, have muddled thoughts! ...

All the world seeks company;

I, though, love solitary heights;

I roll like the wave, restlessly swaying ...

All the world has experience;

I, though, am simple-minded, a fool! ...

I am different from all the world:

But I am Me!

## 21. THE TWENTY-FIRST SAYING

Rightness is the manifestation of the Path.

The power of the Path is inexplicable and inexpressible.

Inexplicable, inexpressible, it contains the notional;

Inexplicable, inexpressible, it contains the material;

Inexplicable, inexpressible, it contains the essential,

As which is the ultimate,

As which is the humane,

Never it wanes: it is the primordial source of existence.

How do I come to such knowledge? I am.

## 22. THE TWENTY-SECOND SAYING

In pieces — whole,  
Bent — straight,  
Empty — full,  
Brought together — it succeeds,  
Fragmented — it fails.

And so:

The Perfect One stands apart and becomes a model  
for the community;  
unconcerned about herself, she stands in full sight;  
dissatisfied with herself, she is honored;  
withdrawn into herself, she becomes the center;  
unobliging to herself, she becomes grand;  
wishing nothing for herself, she becomes untouchable.

The old saying  
in pieces — whole  
would it be void?

Primal volition's power evinces its veracity.

### 23. THE TWENTY-THIRD SAYING

Thoughts that keep changing are true.

The tempest does not roar the whole day:

The weather does not rage the whole day.

Who brings them forth? The Universe.

The Universe itself is in constant transmutation:

All the more so are humans!

And so:

Imitating the working of the Path,

to learn to adapt to it;

Sketching out of the Right-Way,

to learn to adapt to it;

Deferring to decay,

to learn to adapt to it.

Adaptating to the Path,

for by dint of the Path to be absorbed in the Path;

Adaptating to the Right-Way,

for by dint of the Right-Way to enter into the Right-Way;

Adaptating to decay,

for by dint of decay to dissolve in decay.

Only what shares common ground, interacts.

## 24. THE TWENTY-FOURTH SAYING

To stand on tiptoes is not standing:

To spread one's legs is not walking.

Who seeks to stand in the light, stands in the shadow;

Who believes to have reached the goal, walks backwards;

Who makes themselves stand out, is subordinate;

Who elevates themselves, goes down.

This is, in view of the Path, mental debauchery;

in view of purpose, pointless.

Who walks in the Path, is far from this.

## 25. THE TWENTY-FIFTH SAYING

*There is an ordering primordial force,  
The cause of all that exists,  
Immutably perpetual, uncorporeal,  
Its own primordial base, eternally itself,  
All unfolding's primordial mover,  
The primordial form of life.*

Indefinable, humans define it as Path.

Power is magnitude;

Magnitude is immeasurable;

The immeasurable is the infinitely distant;

The infinitely distant is recurrence.

Accordingly so:

The Path is an ultimate magnitude;

The Sky is an ultimate magnitude;

The Earth is an ultimate magnitude;

The Custodian is an ultimate magnitude;

So there are four ultimate magnitudes; one of them  
is the Custodian.

Humans have as their foundation the Earth;

The Earth has as its foundation the Sky;

The Sky has as its foundation the Path;

The Path is its own primordial foundation.

## 26. THE TWENTY-SIXTH SAYING

Sobriety is deeper than lust;  
Calmness is higher than agitation.

And so:

The superior person, ever doing, ever retains the calmness of dignity;  
in worldly heights, only stands within herself;  
beyond what is outside.

But cursed be the worldly-exalted one,  
who lives superficially,

Who by the example of lust  
loosens the bonds of the community!

For lust's careless delirium, beguiling those who know order,  
destroys the order.

## 27. THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SAYING

Good walker does not stumble;  
Good speaker does not stutter;  
Good accountant does not count;  
Good keeper does not lock;  
Good knoter does not tangle;

And so:

The Perfect One always knows what to do;  
never needs to refuse;  
always finds means;  
never needs to admit helplessness.

This is her twofold grandness.

It follows:

The higher person is the lower one's master;  
The lower person is the higher one's instrument.

Respect for the master, love for the instrument:

Irrespective of all strengths, this is the backbone of common order:

This is obvious and essential.

## 28. THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SAYING

To feel strong, to show oneself weak:

    this is the foundation of communal life;

Who possesses it, never derails from the Right-Way;

They return to the desires of infantility.

To feel lucid, to show oneself opaque:

    this is the nature of communal life;

Who possesses it, never strays from the Right-Way;

They return to the knowledge of the universal.

To feel large, to show oneself small:

    this is how communal life comes to be;

Who possesses it, strides steadily forwards in the Right-Way;

They return to the state of mind of simplicity.

Simplicity is the veil of perfection;

The Perfect One, acting accordingly, becomes Head,

Custodian, mild and strong.

## 29. THE TWENTY-NINTH SAYING

To guide the community is, as experience shows, impossible;  
The community is an interrelation of forces,  
    as such, as reason tells, unguidable by any individual's force.

To order it is disrupting its order;

To consolidate it is to disturb it.

For the doings of the individuals keep changing:

    Advancing here, retreating there;

    Showing warmth here, coldness there;

    Exerting force here, showing weakness there,

    Effecting activity here, repose there.

And so:

    The Perfect One avoids the lust for power;

        avoids the allure of power;

        avoids the splendor of power.

### 30. THE THIRTIETH SAYING

To rule in accordance with the Path is to rule without violence:

Counterbalancing interaction regulates the community.

Where there was war grow thorns, and without harvest is the year.

The good person is, and does not resort to violence;

Is, and does not arm herself with splendor;

Is, and does not boast of fame;

Is, and does not depend on deeds;

Is, and does not build upon severity;

Is, and does not strive for power.

Zenith indicates decline.

Outside the Path everything is off the Path.

### 31. THE THIRTY-FIRST SAYING

Violence is not a tool of good, but a tool of evil;

Strength is not violence;

The Wise desires grandness.

Violence is not a tool of the good;

not a tool of the Wise;

not ameliorating: even when pacifying it coerces;

not beautiful: beauty is joy;

not pleasing, unless to the sense for destruction.

The sense for destruction is not in the human sign of strength.

Happiness lives on the left,

Harm lives on the right;

The troops stand on the left,

The leader stands on the right.

Tidings of war — tidings of woe;

Human death — source of tears.

Victory through violence is suffering.

### 32. THE THIRTY-SECOND SAYING

The eternal Path is beyond the particular;  
Simple like the smallest particle of matter, it contains the Universe,  
It is the Custodian as such.

The Beyond mingles with the earthly world;  
    thus flows the dew of fertilization, which humans cannot grasp:  
    The individual comes from separation, comes to an end;  
    Mortality creates awareness of bounds;  
    Awareness of bounds guards against de-individualisation.  
The Path is the bed of the slow-moving stream of the world,  
    like the valley bears within it rivers and lakes.

### 33. THE THIRTY-THIRD SAYING

To see through others is prudence;  
To see through oneself is insight.  
To guide others is capability;  
To guide oneself is might.  
To be able to begin is strength;  
To be able to accomplish is power.  
Non-decay is eternity;  
Non-nullity after death is immortality.

### 34. THE THIRTY-FOURTH SAYING

*Oh Path! Unending! Ever present!*

*The Universe exists through you, grows out of you, rests in you!*

*All-powerful all-encompassing doing!*

*Primordial mother of the Universe, but not Empress,*

*Eternally insubstantial, how small do you appear! ...*

*In you completes the eternal cycle of existence.*

*Oh Non-Empress, how grand do you appear! ...*

And so:

The Perfect One is never creator of grandness;  
is purpose of grandness.

### 35. THE THIRTY-FIFTH SAYING

Who comprehends its grand parable,  
    roams and roams the world ...

Withour obligations ...

Freedom, quietude, sublimity, joy, self-sufficiency are their fare ...

Wandering stranger who beholds.

To preach the Path? Presumptuous folly!

The many would look at it, but would not see it;

The many would listen for it, but would not hear it;

And all the same, without ceasing they would live from its life ...

### 36. THE THIRTY-SIXTH SAYING

Small implies large;  
Weak implies strong;  
Decline implies rise;  
Emptiness implies fullness.

Here lies the principle for contemplating the Beyond:

Hard is a degree of soft;

Strong is a degree of weak.

But just as the fish cannot live outside the tenebrous depth,

Likewise humans should never aspire  
to understand the nature of humans!

### 37. THE THIRTY-SEVENTH SAYING

The Path, immutably inactive, comprehends all action:

Model of the Custodian.

All may bustle in commotion:

I am unshakable in my simplicity's transcendence.

For universal simplicity, all-encompassing, is impassiveness.

Impassive, imperturbable — and so the community becomes *free*.

## THE OTHER BOOK

### 38. THE THIRTY-EIGHTH SAYING

To truly be in the Right-Way is not wanting to be in the Right-Way:  
thus one is in one's Right-Way.

Almost to be in the Right-Way is wanting not to stray from  
the Right-Way:

thus one strays from one's Right-Way.

The true Right-Way is non-intentional action, and non-will to act;

Almost the Right-Way is intentional action and will to act;

Morality is intentional action and non-will to act;

The law is intentional action and accomplishment of action;

Propriety is intentional action and forced reciprocal completion  
of action.

And so:

The Path lost, there remains the Right-Way;

The Right-Way lost, there remains morality;

Morality lost, there remains the law;

The law lost, there remains propriety;

Propriety is only appearance of morality, and indication of decay;

Education though, while also an image of the Path, is means of decay.

And so:

The Perfect One stays with the essence, avoids the appearance;

stays with the source, avoids the spout;

eschews the one, seeks the other.

### 39. THE THIRTY-NINTH SAYING

To be is to participate in the All-One.

The Universe, as such, has order;

The Earth, as such, has solidity;

The mind, as such, has consciousness;

The hollow, as such, has content;

The being, as such, has life;

The Custodian, as such, upholds self-ordering of the community:

Everything is as it is through the All-One.

Without order the Universe would dissipate;

Without solidity the Earth would fall apart;

Without consciousness the mind would fade away;

Without content the hollow would shatter;

Without life the being would dissolve;

Without upholding self-organization, the Custodian  
would be perturber:

For the Exalted One comes from the host of the ordinary;

High stands upon low.

And so:

The Custodian deems herself as nought,

Insignificant, desiring nothing,

Born out of what has to be ordered.

The sum of the parts is not the whole:

Destroy the power of the primordial will,

and not will emerge a jewel's clear and orderly shape,  
but unshapely pebble.

#### 40. THE FORTIETH SAYING

The eternal cycle is the path of the Path;  
Letting be is the working of the Path.  
The individual beings float towards life,  
in life float towards nothingness.

#### 41. THE FOURTY-FIRST SAYING

The fully Wise understands the Path and deepens it;  
The half Wise understands the Path and preserves it;  
The little Wise understands the Path and uses it,  
unable to follow it.

And so it was said:

Who permeates the Path, is un-separated;  
Who proceeds within the Path, is in un-separation;  
Who understands the Path, is human.

The Right-Way of grandness is to let all be;  
Perfect purity is simplicity;

The Right-Way of expanse is non-will to act;  
The Right-Way of strength is primordiality.

Understanding this is to grow many times over.

Infinitely large rectangle is without corners;  
Infinitely large receptacle holds nothing;  
Infinitely large sound is silent;  
Infinitely large image is without shape.

The Path is beyond the senses and beyond the particular;  
comprehends all that occurs.

## 42. THE FOURTY-SECOND SAYING

The Path set apart one;

One set apart two;

Two set apart three;

Three set apart the manifold.

The manifold hovers in letting be, hovers around doing:

The non-particular creates the equilibrium.

The individual driven by will to act and to not let be  
is therefore inadmissible in communal life;

The Custodian is furtherer of that equilibrium and therefore grand.

Gain becomes loss;

Loss becomes gain:

This is the teaching of the people.

I teach:

They who desire do not reach their deaths.

This is my maxim.

### 43. THE FOURTY-THRD SAYING

The most pliable parts of the community lead the most unyielding.

The non-particular permeates stable matter.

In this I see the superiority of non-desiring.

Teaching without speaking, accomplishing without doing,  
are rare within the community.

#### 44. THE FOURTY-FOURTH SAYING

Which is closer to me, the name or the self?

Which is closer to me, the self or the possessions?

Which is harder for me, gain or loss?

Overabundance creates pain;

Wealth creates misery.

Observing bounds, avoiding the impossible;

This is the condition for everlastingness.

#### 45. THE FOURTY-FIFTH SAYING

Human perfection remains deficiency; it is unattainable;  
Human wholeness remains naught; it is unaccomplishable;  
Human law remains obliquity;  
Human knowledge remains foolishness;  
Human art remains stammering.

    Motion overcomes cold;

    Repose overcomes heat:

And still the ever-perfected remains the human ideal ...

#### 46. THE FOURTY-SIXTH SAYING

When the community lives in the Path,  
the war-horses pull the plow;

When the community strays from the Path,  
the war-horses guard the border.

There is no greater sin than impetuosity;

There is no greater malady than excess;

There is no greater deficiency than ambition for glory:

Contented are, who content themselves.

#### 47. THE FOURTY-SEVENTH SAYING

Without going out, one can know humankind;

Without looking out, one can see through:

Who sees much, knows little.

And so:

The Perfect One arrives without a step;

knows without observing;

accomplishes without wanting.

#### 48. THE FOURTY-EIGHTH SAYING

Learning leads further and further:

Following the Path leads backwards,

    further and further back, unto not-wanting.

Not-wanting, not not-acting, is the essence of the community;

Continuous absence of individual will:

Individual will does not order the community.

#### 49. THE FOURTY-NINTH SAYING

The Perfect One does not have an individual conscience;  
has a community conscience:

Good towards the good;  
And good towards the not-good:  
This is the Right-Way of goodness.

Honest towards the honest;  
And honest towards the not-honest:  
This is the Right-Way of honesty.

The Perfect One, in the community, sees to it  
that the community will not disturb her conscience.

The members of the community listen to and look at her,  
as if children of the Perfect One.

## 50. THE FIFTIETH SAYING

To enter life means to float towards death.

Three out of ten strive towards life;

Three out of ten strive towards death;

Three out of ten strive towards life, but rush towards death.

Why? Out of love for life.

The One on the other hand, who knows the nature of life,

lives and does not fear tiger nor unicorn;

fights and does not need armor:

the unicorn would not find where to employ its horn;

the tiger would not find where to employ its paw;

the enemy would not find where to employ their sword.

Why? She stands above life.

## 51. THE FIFTY-FIRST SAYING

*The Path — cause,*  
*The Right-Way — preserver,*  
*The division — creator,*  
*The force — doer.*

And so:

All beings venerate the Path;  
honor the Right-Way.

Veneration of the Path,  
Honoring of the Right-Way  
are not conscious duty,  
are unconscious urge.

The Path creates everything,  
furthers everything,  
develops everything,  
nourishes everything,  
perfects everything,  
ripens everything,  
preserves everything,  
keeps everything in circulation,  
leads and does not possess,  
effects and does not act,  
has, and is not Master.

This is its mysterious essence.

## 52. THE FIFTY-SECOND SAYING

The all-benevolent humane appears as the mother of humans.

Acknowledging the mother means knowing to be her child,

Knowing to be child means continued life of the mother,

And this means preservation from decay.

Consolidating life's force,

Ending of fragmentation:

Thus life's fountain will not be exhausted.

Fragmenting life's force,

Deference to urge of acting:

Thus life's fountain will soon be dry.

Uncovering one's depths is clarity;

Overcoming one's weakness is strength.

Living in this grandness,

Entering into this clarity:

*And so the destruction of the body is not a loss:*

*This is immortality.*

### 53. THE FIFTY-THIRD SAYING

To cultivate a person means to lead them into the Path,  
To want is malady.

The Path is wide, but humans love narrow trails:

Shining castles — barren fields, empty barns,

The nobles boasting luxurious clothes, elaborate arms, lavish meals,  
treasure troves:

This is theft, extravagant vainglory,

Outside the Path.

## 54. THE FIFTY-FOURTH SAYING

Firmly founded lineage will not decline,  
Firmly led lineage will not perish:  
Forever grandchildren will honor the ancestors.

Accordingly so:

In personal matters, the Right-Way is uprightness,  
In lineage matters, the Right-Way is prosperity,  
In municipal matters, the Right-Way is continuity,  
In national matters, the Right-Way is forcefulness,  
In community matters, the Right-Way is order.

And so:

Self measures itself against self;  
Lineage measures itself against lineage;  
Municipality measures itself against municipality;  
Nation measures itself against nation;  
Community measures itself against community.  
What is the foundation of this way of thinking?

This very way of thinking.

## 55. THE FIFTY-FIFTH SAYING

Who is within the Right-Way resembles the child.

It does not fear the poisonous vermin's bite,  
does not fear the wild beast's claws,  
does not fear the bird of prey's talons,  
has soft bones, tender sinews, but a firm grip,  
has no consciousness of sexuality, but its genitals stir:  
Perfect order!  
can wail all day, but does not become hoarse:  
Perfect self-sufficiency!

Knowing the self-sufficiency of life means everlastingness,

Knowing the nature of everlastingness means clarity,

Observing one's own life means to decay,

Desiring one's own life means to fight,

and fighting means also to decay,

All this is outside the Path.

Outside the Path, everything is decay.

## 56. THE FIFTY-SIXTH SAYING

Those who know, do not talk,

Those who talk, do not know.

To consolidate life,

To preclude fragmentation,

To dull sharpness,

To clarify confusion,

To soften glare,

To pretend to be ordinary:

    This is profoundness in communal life.

Above fame,

Above disgrace,

Above honor,

Above contempt:

    This is virtue in communal life.

## 57. THE FIFTY-SEVENTH SAYING

Integrity begets peaceful ruling;

Proficiency only begets strife.

Not-wanting begets order of the community.

How did I come to such principle of the community?

Thus:

Interdiction begets coercion,

Command begets disturbance,

Artfulness begets malevolence,

Law begets crime.

Consequently the Perfect One says:

I observe not-wanting,

and the nation grows according to its disposition;

I observe not-acting,

and the nation governs itself by virtue of the force of fate;

I observe not-commiserating,

and the nation flourishes, because left to itself;

I observe not-being,

and the nation is as it must be, through itself.

## 58. THE FIFTY-EIGHTH SAYING

Inactive administration — happy people,  
Eager administration — sorrowful people.

Misfortune — happiness surrounds it,

Happiness — misfortune encloses it.

Who knows — which will prevail?

Walking straight? ...

    Straight turns into bent,

    Good turns into bad.

Eternal human blindness! ...

And so:

The Perfect One is a cornerless rectangle,

    a vertexless angle,

    straight but soft,

    clear but not glaring.

## 59. THE FIFTY-NINTH SAYING

For the advancement of humanity,  
For the development of the mind, the supreme method is to let be,  
To let be is to ease into the Right-Way,  
Easing into the Right-Way becomes advancing in the Right-Way,  
Advancing in the Right-Way becomes all-adaptation,  
All-adaptation becomes non-particularity,  
Non-particularity is prerequisite of administering the community.  
Applying such principle of administration brings permanence,  
    means deep root,  
        strong stem,  
        route to immortal power.

## 60. THE SIXTIETH SAYING

Administering the community is like letting slowly simmer.

When the community is within the Path,

no soul shows individual intent.

Though there is individual intent:

it is not directed against others.

Though individual intent could be directed against others:

the Perfect One does not direct it against others.

“Perfect” and “other” never meet:

*Their Right-Ways are in the same direction.*

## 61. THE SIXTY-FIRST SAYING

The large nation is like the valley towards which the rivers flow,  
cradle of the humane,  
female counterpart of the community.

The feminine always reins in the masculine through receptivity;  
Receptivity means stooping down.

And so:

The large nation has impact upon the small nation  
through stooping down to the small nation,  
The small nation has impact upon the large nation  
through stooping down to the large nation:

Stooping down always is superiority.

The large nation's purpose is integration and sustenance  
of the people,

The small nation's purpose is furtherance and welfare of the people:

Thus both fulfill their purpose.

Grandness is nothing but stooping down.

## 62. THE SIXTY-SECOND SAYING

The Path is the container of everything,  
treasure of the proficient,  
shelter of the lost.

Noble words about it may well bring honor,

Noble deeds according to it may well bring fame:

But above all: It does not forsake those who got lost.

Emperor's power, king's splendor

come not close to a single guidance back into the Path.

The Ancient ones saw their highest good in the Path.

Why?

Because it can be found through labor;

Because, through itself, those who got lost are led back into it.

And so it is the human beings' highest good.

### 63. THE SIXTY-THIRD SAYING

To want without wanting to want;

To do without wanting to do;

To feel without wanting to feel.

To see large as small;

To see much as little;

To see bad as good.

Difficult is an advanced state of easy;

Large is an advanced state of small.

The difficult community issues arise from easy ones;

The large community issues arise from small ones;

And so:

The Perfect One is not concerned with what is already grand,  
therefore accomplishes grand things.

Who promises much, keeps little;

Who easily believes, finds little.

And so:

The Perfect One deems everything difficult;  
finds everything easy.

## 64. THE SIXTY-FOURTH SAYING

What doesn't stir is easy to hold;  
What has not yet appeared is easy to quell;  
What is still weak is easy to destroy.

To thwart before the accomplished fact;  
To make peace before the battle.

Huge tree has one thin hair as its root;  
Nine-storied tower has one clod of earth as its foundation;  
A thousand miles begin underneath your foot.

Failing becomes possible through wanting;  
Losing becomes possible through winning.

And so:

The Perfect One wants not, therefore does not fail;  
wins not, therefore does not lose;  
The many fail at the moment of success.  
Considering the end like the beginning:  
This would be the way of succeeding.

And so:

The Perfect One desires absence of desire;  
learns to unlearn;  
offends common sense;  
is Custodian;  
observes not-wanting;  
does not disturb development out of itself.

## 65. THE SIXTY-FIFTH SAYING

The Ancient ones knew the Path;

did not educate the many;

kept the many in ignorance:

Educated plebs are difficult to guide.

Guiding the nation through cleverness is calamity;

Guiding the nation through appearance of foolishness is good fortune.

Applying such principle means to be commendable;

Achieving such goal means to be within the Right-Way:

Right-Way ... Deep! ... Mysterious! ... Afar! ...

Within you flows all that lives!

Through you the world is in balance!

## 66. THE SIXTY-SIXTH SAYING

Rivers and lakes are rulers of the valleys,  
for they underlie them;

Herein lies the condition for being ruler.

And so:

The Perfect One rises above the many through words of humility;  
puts herself at the vanguard of the many through hiding the self;  
is therefore above the many, without coercing them;  
is therefore at the vanguard of the many, without humiliating them.

Thus the community is prosperous and feels itself free;

The Custodian observes non-acting;

The community cannot harm her.

## 67. THE SIXTY-SEVENTH SAYING

They call me grand,  
And say, I am not like the others ...  
Grand ... and undoubtedly one hears “not like the others,”  
    not like those who forever “are like the others,”  
        and thus in fact quite small ...

That is  
I have three values which I honor and uphold.  
The first one is sense of reciprocity;  
The second one is dignity of detachment;  
The third one is humbleness in matters of the community.  
Reciprocity gives me courage;  
Dignity gives me nobility;  
Humbleness makes me Custodian.

Today though  
    no reciprocity, but insolence;  
    no dignity, but empty praise’s clamor;  
    no humbleness, but lust for shallow glory:

    This is the road to decay.

Sense of reciprocity in war brings victory, in peace brings strength.  
The Universe preserves;  
The sense of reciprocity furthers.

68. THE SIXTY-EIGHTH SAYING

Able expert does not quarrel;

Able fighter does not rage;

Able tamer does not flog;

Able administrator does not rule.

This is the Right-Way of peace;

the means of administration;

the counterpart of the Universe,

the primordial perfection.

## 69. THE SIXTY-NINTH SAYING

Guiding principle for fighters:

To be host, not visitor;

To retreat by yards, rather than advance by inches.

And so:

Progressing without advancing;

Acquiring without conquering;

Having without taking.

There is no greater ill than to decide rashly:

this is losing.

Accordingly so:

Of two fighters the thinking one wins.

## 70. THE SEVENTIETH SAYING

My teachings are easy to understand,  
easy to follow;

The many cannot understand them,  
cannot follow them.

My teachings have One principle;

My acting has One fundamental form.

Who does not know them, does not understand.

Few understand me: this is my grandness.

And so:

The Perfect One seems small,  
is grand.

71. THE SEVENTY-FIRST SAYING

To know one's ignorance is nobility;

Not to know one's ignorance is affliction.

To sense the affliction means not to have it anymore:

    The Perfect One is free of this affliction;

        senses it, therefore does not have it.

## 72. THE SEVENTY-SECOND SAYING

Who does not expect misfortune anymore,  
perishes through misfortune.

Not to deem oneself little;

Not to deem oneself small;

Not deem it, and it isn't.

And so:

The Perfect One knows herself, without showing herself;  
suffices herself, without overestimating herself;  
eschews the one;  
seeks the other.

### 73. THE SEVENTY-THIRD SAYING

Those who are bold, dare to kill;  
Those who are not bold, dare to let live.  
Both at times are good, and at times are bad:  
Who knows the judgment of the Universe?  
The Perfect One remains uneasy.  
The Path of the All-That-Is is this:  
    Victory without battle;  
    Obedience without command;  
    Attraction without request;  
    Action without doing.

The net of the All-That-Is has wide meshes,  
But nothing escapes ...

#### 74. THE SEVENTY-FOURTH SAYING

“When the people do not fear death anymore,  
Who will guide the people by means of fear of death?  
When the people fear death,  
They can usefully be guided by means of fear of death” ...

No!

There is a tribunal over life and death;  
But who in its stead judges over life and death,  
Is like one who in place of the woodcutter puts the ax to the tree:  
They will easily cut their own hand.

## 75. THE SEVENTY-FIFTH SAYING

The people suffer because the noble revel in luxury;

Therefore people's misery.

The people hold grudges because the noble bluster;

Therefore people's upheaval.

The people disdain death, because they are serfs to life;

Therefore people's weariness of life.

To live above life is more profound than to live within life.

## 76. THE SEVENTY-SIXTH SAYING

Soft and tender, thus humans are born,  
Hard and firm they die.

Pliant and tender, thus sprouts a tree,  
Rigid and firm it dies.

And so:

Rigid and firm are ways of death;  
Soft and pliant are ways of life.

Accordingly so:

Mighty and firm is low,  
Tender and soft is high.

## 77. THE SEVENTY-SEVENTH SAYING

The Path of the Universe resembles the drawing of a bow:

Stretching the arch, filling the hollow;

Taking away a too-much, filling in a too-little.

The Path of the Universe:

Removing excess,

Replenishing dearth.

The way of humans is different:

Removing where there is already dearth,

Replenishing where there is already excess.

Who devotes their abundance to the community, is in the Path.

And so:

The Perfect One acts without doing;

effects without acting;

vanishes.

## 78. THE SEVENTY-EIGHTH SAYING

Nothing in the world is softer and more pliant than water,  
Nothing more powerful, too, to bend what is rigid and firm:  
Undefeatable because all-adapting.

Equally so:

    The whole world knows: weak defeats strong,

        Soft defeats rigid;

    But no one acts accordingly.

And so the Perfect One says:

Who carries the community's guilt, is its protector;

Who carries the community's misery, is its master:

Inconvenient truth! ...

## 79. THE SEVENTY-NINTH SAYING

After strong hatred remains small hatred:

Nothing perishes.

And so:

The Perfect One fulfills her part;

does not put her hope in others.

Those who are in the Right-Way are subject to their imperatives;

Those who are outside the Right-Way are subject to their desires.

The Path of the Universe is equality of significance:

In it float the righteous.

## 80. THE EIGHTIETH SAYING

The nation is small;

The people numerous;

Weapons for ten to a hundred men, but not employed;

Loving life;

Being attached to the soil;

Ships and carts, but not in use;

Arms for defense and protection, but without purpose;

Return to knotted ropes.

And so:

    The dish would be relished;

    The garment would be pleasing;

    The home would be satisfactory;

    The customs would be mild.

And if settlements were so close that clearly were heard

        crowing of roosters and barking of dogs:

*Live, age and die, but do not merge.*

## 81. THE FINAL SAYING

True word is unpleasant;

Pleasant word is untrue.

Worthy person is strifeless;

Striving person is worthless.

Wise person is unlearned;

Learned person is unwise.

The Perfect One does not accumulate her belongings;

    squanders upon the humane and gains;

    bestows upon the humane and is rich.

*The Path of the Universe:*

*Reconciliation without fight.*

*The Path of humans:*

*Deed without coercion.*

## AFTERWORD

Li Pe-Jang was apparently born in 604 BCE. His parents were farmers. He became the archivist and chronicler for a prince of the Zhou Dynasty. He soon grew weary of court life and the affairs of state. He withdrew to a hut situated on the slope of a mountain in the Han-Koan district. He lived there in solitude for many decades and wrote a small book. At the age of over eighty, he left his home, traveled west, and was never seen again.

That is all we know for certain about the greatest philosopher that humanity has brought forth so far.

We therefore know much more about him than we know about Jesus of Nazareth. We know the essentials: we know that he lived and that the tiny yet monumental work bearing his name was conceived and written by him, by a single human being.

Would we not be certain of this bare historical fact, we would have no choice but to follow the “Gospels” that recount his mythical life, and to regard him, under the name Lao-Tse, like Jesus or Achilles, as the center of a mythological cycle that perhaps revolves around a historical figure unknown to us, or perhaps around the personification of a natural force or an abstract principle:

Lao-Tse, too, was born of a virgin, as it is invariably regarded as necessary for the emergence of truly great social organizers among all peoples, from the most highly developed to the simplest, across all latitudes and longitudes. But his father was not, as is customary in Indo-European cultures on such occasions, the primal force of the universe already faded into the form of an individual being, a god,

an animal, or a spirit, but that primal force itself. Lao-Tse was the child of a sunbeam and a peasant girl. His mother gave birth to him after eighty-one years of pregnancy. The newborn had snow-white hair and snow-white eyebrows and was, of course, as wise as other mortals at the age of eighty. That is why he was called Lao-Tse, meaning “old-man child.”

In the course of his long life, he naturally performed countless miracles. But there is no need to recount them. For the miracles of great men who have become mythical heroes are always and everywhere the same. Whether they appear in the fabulous life stories of Lao-Tse, the Buddha, or Christ is irrelevant. People, whether Chinese, Indian, Jewish, Greek, Yakut, or Quechua, attribute to those they perceive as superhuman the powers they themselves would like to possess. And when always and everywhere the superhuman brings the dead back to life, calms raging waves, heals the sick, and draws intoxicating drinks from water, this only proves that all peoples capable of inventing great mythical heroes stand at the height of life, take joy in life, wish to extend life into the infinite, and fill it with joyful festivals.

After his divine activities on earth, Lao-Tse naturally vanished into heaven. And just as naturally, he immediately became there the third member of that Trinity which, from the earliest Chinese through the Indians and Christians all the way to Hegel, has governed world events. In Hegel, this Trinity has faded into the hollow formula of Being, Non-Being, and Becoming; among Christians, it is called God the Father, Holy Spirit, and God the Son; the Brahmins call them Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu; the Buddhists created Amitabha, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya; the disciples of Lao-Tse, the Taoists, saw in their master the element of becoming, the Savior, Vishnu, and Maitreya; but this third link seemed so important to them, as the sole force guiding the sensory

world and life, that they found no names for the other two and combined the farmer Li Pe-jang, who had become a god, with those two unnameable principles into the concept of the Three Purities, San-Thsing.

It is unnecessary to trace in detail the immense religious edifice of Taoism, which is built upon the name of Lao-Tse and the little book by the archivist Li Pe-jang. It teems with deities, spirits, saints, silly rites, sleight-of-hand tricks, and superstitious nonsense; over time it became a system for exploiting the foolish, for whom religion was maintained with some success through the splendor of processions and rites, through the display of sleight-of-hand miracles, and through an artificially nurtured fear of superhuman beings, gods, spirits, devils, and monsters.

But in contrast to events in the Indo-European cultural sphere, this terrible distortion and exploitation of great ideas became, within a few centuries, the laughingstock of all those endowed with common sense, that is — since we are speaking of the Chinese — the vast majority of the people.

This rapid process of recovery for a nation that was then, as now, the most populous in the world, is by no means a matter of temperament; for the Chinese are at least as sentimental, religious, and superstitious by nature as Europeans. The cure for that mental derangement, which had been branded as religion, was a matter of knowledge. It was known and could be historically proven that Lao-Tse, the third god of the Trinity, was none other than the archivist Li Pe-jang. It was known and could be historically proven that this Li Pe-jang had written only a small book containing merely eighty-one sayings and bearing the title “Tao-Te-Ching.” One therefore knew exactly what this Li Pe-jang or Lao-Tse had really thought: one needed

only to read his book. Consequently, it was known and had been proven that the entire Taoist religion, its teachings, its organization, its interference in the lives of the people, was based on lies and deceit, or at the very least on the unauthorized invocation of a great philosopher by pitiful hysterics or shrewd businessmen.

The Taoist religion along with its literature was therefore dismissed, thanks to a single historical document about its alleged founder, at a time when Christianity, whose path was not blocked by a similar stumbling block, was just beginning to bring the proletariat of the Roman Empire into its fold.

Taoism however was, of course, not dead. It remained the spiritual framework of the narrow-minded, those incapable of distinguishing facts from delusions, who are unwilling to forgo imaginary protection against the products of their own ignorance and lack of insight. Thus, a religious system lives on even today under the name of the great ancient sage, as a living caricature of the deepest thoughts, to the derision of all educated Chinese. But Europeans have the least reason to join in this derision. Moreover, the Taoists have an excuse, a very valid excuse.

They have the Book of Lao-Tse. They have the Tao-Te-Ching. And the Tao-Te-Ching is so vast and so profound that they cannot understand it; indeed, very few are even able to grasp its meaning. But it leaves even the most foolish with the impression of something extraordinary, something immense. And something extraordinary, something immense that is incomprehensible, is easily elevated into the sphere of the superhuman. It becomes sacred; it becomes religion. Religion is, after all, nothing but the anthropomorphization of the unknown. Thus the wise man's definitions became gods, his psycho-

logical analyses became world systems, his pithy formulas became magic spells, and he himself became the supreme god.

It was undoubtedly dangerous and difficult to drag the god and his religion through the mud, and place the sage, with his slim book, on the pedestal in his stead. For even those who knew that Lao-Tse had been a human being and an archivist, and who read his work, did not understand it, and thus remained exposed to the danger of having to interpret it as something superhuman. But the Chinese helped themselves with an anecdote that every child learns and that relieves every Chinese person of the duty to understand Lao-Tse, yet at the same time compels them to honor him as the deepest sage their nation has produced. For it is told that Confucius once met the old Lao-Tse and spoke with him. Then he is said to have returned to his disciples pensively and told them that Lao-Tse's thoughts were so profound and his teachings so sublime that they filled him with awe and dread, but that he was too small to understand them properly.

Thus the god Lao-Tse became human again, and it was no longer a shame not to comprehend him.

We Europeans, with our millennia-old Indo-European eccentricities, are perhaps even less capable of following the thought of a Lao-Tse than the simplest Chinese person. Our entire intellectual life is still too much subject to an influence that one could almost call the Indo-European curse: we humanize, we anthropomorphize everything. We open our mouths, and every sentence we speak is a weird web of delusions. We ascribe gender to every thing just as to humans. We have every thing and every abstraction perform actions like living beings. Every one of our sentences has a subject that does something, even if it can do nothing at all; an object to which it is done, a verb that expresses an activity that is almost always imaginary. Every one of our

sentences identifies everything with human activity. And once we take a disrespectful closer look at where this Indo-European language, incomparable in poetry but dreadfully dangerous in understanding, has led us in the realm of pure knowledge, we realize to our horror that for over two millennia the entire European philosophy, from Plato to Schopenhauer, in rubber boots of naivity has waded in circles around itself in the swamp of delusional anthropomorphization.

As a Chinese, Lao-Tse was not subject to this pitiful fate. He was able to operate with things, facts, and ideas, whereas we have only humanized images at our disposal. Thus he was able to accomplish his monumental work in eighty-one short sayings. But what sayings! The reciprocal illumination of ideas, the mathematical precision in describing the most remote abstractions, the bold synthesis of things we scarcely dare to analyze, a mastery of expression that was likely only possible in the ancient Chinese language and its ideographic script: all this condensed the ample content of eighty-one volumes into eighty-one aphorisms.

Europeans have sinned against these sayings almost more than the Chinese. The latter simply did not understand them, but admitted their inability and thereby earned the right either to set the great sage aside or to interpret a wholly mystical world into his writings. The former, on the other hand, pounced on the old dead master with all the arrogance of philological and philosophical know-it-all-ism. They subjected him to 'scientific analysis'; they dissected him philologically, reduced him to a mere linguistic specimen, wrapped him in countless footnotes, variants, supposedly critical remarks and alleged Chinese commentaries, and thus incorporated him into the morgues of literature, the libraries. And then the terrible thing happened: Lao-Tse, entirely wrongly dissected by the philologists, was reassembled by

so-called philosophers who understood nothing of that anatomical work, and was now presented to the shrugging public as a caricature of himself in preposterous forms.

Stanislaus Julien, the great French sinologist, was the first to attempt the translation of the Tao-Te-Ching, the most difficult text known to the Chinese. His work is, being the first, magnificent; yet it is rife with errors and dangerous interpretations that were unavoidable at the time. Less excusable however is the fact that without exception all later sinologists who sought to translate the original Chinese text repeated the fundamental error of the great Frenchman and the Chinese commentators on Lao-Tse.

This error was to not consider the era in which the old master wrote. Lao-Tse lived twenty-five centuries ago, and yet his writings are read as if they were written yesterday. Certainly, nowhere is such a misconception more seductive than in Chinese, for today the same hieroglyphs are used as in Lao-Tse's time. The character that meant "horse" back then still means "horse" today. And a cooking pot is still written today with the same character that Lao-Tzu used. But what was a horse twenty-five centuries ago is still a horse today; and a pot remains a pot for all eternity. Abstract concepts, on the other hand, change their meaning as people change. Initially they are always expressed through sensorial symbols or through analogies with human relationships. These symbols are retained in the language, while their content changes with the state of mind of the people. And so, ultimately, the original meaning of the symbolic expression no longer corresponds to the meaning that was later intended to be expressed; indeed, it often reverses it into its opposite. And one misunderstands the ancient texts entirely if one ascribes to their linguistic expressions

of abstract concepts the meaning they have now, instead of determining what meaning they actually had at the time the text was written.

What, for example, does the Latin word *virtus* mean, and what do the French *vertu* and the German *Tugend* mean? The French word, when used in the singular, has almost exclusively the meaning of female sexual abstinence. It has become the exact opposite of the Latin *virtus*, which means nothing else than manliness, or what is typical of a man. Linguistically the German *Tugend* means nothing else than fitness, competence, or the capacity for action, whereas now, quite the opposite, it denotes the ability to inhibit impulses from acting. Anyone who confuses the *virtus* of a Mucius Scaevola with the *vertu* of a Parisian working woman, or regards Siegfried's virtue as the same as that of a faithful wife, makes a fool of themselves.

It is equally ridiculous to attribute to a Chinese hieroglyph, which has remained unchanged through the millennia, the same value and meaning in a text from ancient antiquity as the modern Chinese ascribe to it. This is the error philologists have made regarding Lao-Tse. They have neglected to determine what meaning the hieroglyphs comprising the Tao-Te-Ching possessed in the sixth century BCE. Above all, they have forgotten that Chinese writing is a pictographic script, in which, in ancient times, the meaning of each image was naturally much closer to the object it represented than it is now. In Lao-Tse's time, the pictorial meaning of all the characters that are not immediately recognizable as phonetic mnemonics was much less diluted than it is now, and given the great age of the text the original meaning of the image is the only acceptable one.

The hieroglyph "Tao," for example, which Lao-Tse uses to denote the principle of his system, represents a well-trodden path, a road, and anyone who translates the word as "universal reason" or even "God"

commits a horrifying reinterpretation based on modernity-infected and on top of that Indo-European prejudices. Likewise, the hieroglyph “Te” has never meant “virtue,” as it is persistently translated; it is composed of the image of walking straight ahead and the image of the heart; it thus signifies the spiritual walking straight ahead, the right path of life, or, in a more limited sense, at most, uprightness. These two actual concepts of “path” and “right way” have absolutely nothing to do with what we commonly imagine under “universal reason” and “virtue” or even under “God” and “moral purity.”

My translation of the Tao Te Ching treats every character of the text in a similar manner. And to my delight, I have thereby found clear meaning and profound wisdom in many places where the Chinese commentators found obscurity and the Western philologists all too often only found mere nonsense.

It should be added that the Chinese commentators that have come down to us, who have all too often been consulted as authorities for the philological study of the text, all wrote at a time when Lao-Tse’s philosophy had long since been lost and the meaning of the hieroglyphs for abstract concepts, as well as the syntax, had changed significantly, so that they are just as irrelevant to understanding the text as, for example, medieval scholasticism is to the exegesis of biblical texts.

But the worst thing for Lao-Tse was the repeated revision of the philologically dissected, yet erroneous, translations of the Tao-Te-Ching by lawyers, philosophers, Orientalists, and writers who did not know Chinese. Such adaptations, critiques, and interpretations exist almost exclusively in Germany. We have Lao-Tse in folksy rhyming verses; indeed, we even have one in doggerel, for which one of the most famous German jurists is to blame. Simultaneously Lao-Tse became easy prey for Indologists, who, taking pleasure in the erroneous

translations available to them, identified words such as “universal reason,” “asceticism,” and even “nirvana,” and now, looking down from on high, lectured that Lao-Tse was a kind of Buddhist (even though he lived before Buddha), or that his philosophy was that of the Vedanta or the Upanishads (who teach almost the exact opposite of Lao-Tse’s ideas). But Lao-Tse interprets life, whereas the Indians always only interpret the beyond-the-life. And it is nothing but an unjustified attempt to extend the power of the Indo-European world view, to read Indian elements into Lao-Tse. It has come to the point where even the great Deussen, who is wholly absorbed in Indian thought, supposes that the Tao Te Ching is an (Indo-European) palm tree above the undergrowth of (genuinely Chinese) Confucianism, whereas in reality Lao-Tse is perhaps more Chinese than Kong-Tse, only that the former relates to the latter much as Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” to Knigge’s “Practical Philosophy of Social Life.”

Some of these scholars, who have sought to determine Lao-Tse’s place in the history of human ideas without having been able to study the text of the Tao Te Ching themselves, naturally did not find their Lao-Tse in my translation that first appeared in French years ago, and from this, and the further circumstance that I retain philological footnotes, variants, and commentaries in my working notebooks, have amusingly concluded that I am just as unfamiliar with Chinese as they are, and that my work is therefore not worth considering for them. But in any case I have earned the approval of the Chinese scholars, to whom on the spot I translated back into modern Chinese the essential passages of the text that they did not understand, finding its meaning by the method described above, and to whom it was as if scales had fallen from their eyes.

It is in and of itself impossible, as the historiographers of phi-

losophy would like, to integrate Lao-Tse into the system of the history of (Indo-European) philosophy. For he has common ground with only one single Western thinker, who, like a solitary comet, is likewise excluded from the planetary system of the recognized philosophers quietly revolving around one another.

Lao-Tse stands beyond Nietzsche. The irony of history would have it — one is almost tempted to say, naturally — that the only person who has gone further than the strongest of the moderns is the oldest whose knowledge has come down to us, the greatest as well, and perhaps precisely for that reason the most unknown. Before Buddha and Plato he descended into the deepest depths of existence and saw through the darkness of the world's mystery with quiet clarity. He articulated with sublime calm what we, after Nietzsche, hardly dare to quietly hint at. He was the most thorough metaphysician, for he denies all being beyond humanity; the boldest ethicist, for he reveals the madness that drives humanity to rebel against the unalterable course of natural occurrences; the most ruthless explorer of the soul, for he demonstrates that everything the human spirit conceives is a playful by-product of the developments that roll on in eternal regularity; the greatest human being, for he reduces the magnificent glistening edifice of our collectively imagined intellectual grandeur to dust, not like Nietzsche in a shattering struggle, but with smiling superiority.

But only the finished work, the book as such, unburdened by discussions, commentaries, and critical appendages, can affect the reader's mind. No one would read, let alone feel, Shakespeare in German if every word were smothered by annotations. What is right for the English genius must be fair to the Chinese. My translation is for readers, not for philologists; for people who seek the spirit of the work, not for scholars who seek to analyze the book.

When years ago my translation first appeared in French, the great Chinese, being incomprehensible and indigestible, was still unknown even to the most refined intellects. Then Octave Mirbeau described the emergence of the readable Lao-Tse as “the revelation of the most beautiful book that in the course of human history a human being has ever undertaken to conceive and to write; something as important, as immense, as if Homer or the Bible were suddenly shown to humanity for the first time.” The German spirit — after Nietzsche — is, however, undoubtedly much closer to the Tao Te Ching than the French.

It is impossible to sketch even a rough outline of the entire intellectual world of the great Chinese. Everyone must experience it for themselves, saying by saying, verse by verse. Lao-Tse, after all, knows everything that a human being can know about the nature of the world. Whatever the greatest genius can achieve through instinct, intuition, observation, thought, and emotion, Lao-Tse has achieved it. He knows every fiber of the human heart. The soul of the masses holds no secrets for him. The inner life of his people and of all peoples is clear to him. The “social structure of instincts,” the essence of society and its life: he sets it forth in calm clarity, two thousand five hundred years before Nietzsche. He knows the workings of nature, its secrets, terrors, and delights better than any human has ever known them. What we grope for, he shows us tangibly. He has no doubts, for he possesses truths. He is not obscure, for all his thinking is as clear as the sun. When he wrote this wondrous book, a book for everyone and not for no one, poem and textbook, Bible for kings and citizens, for warriors and peasants, for artists, scholars, the rich and the poor, for the foolish and the wise, in that distant time he taught, deeper than Goethe, higher than Darwin, the laws of eternal development. And never did he lose himself in the fog of metaphysical dreams. Never did he leave the firm

ground of real existence, upon which he, a mathematician before all mathematics, drew the plan of events in its immutable form with a calm, sure hand.

From Lao-Tse to Nietzsche the history of knowledge of the ultimate things describes a spiral. The two are close to one another. But where is the beginning, and where is the end of the curve? Lao-Tse must be a distant descendant of Nietzsche. Or perhaps China is thirty centuries ahead of Europe.

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(translation by DeepL and R.S.)