

“A journey of a thousand miles began with one step.”
—*Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 64



Summary: *Tao Te Ching* is an ancient Chinese text written in ~400BC. The picture to the left is an ink on silk manuscript of *Tao Te Ching* dating back to ~200BC, or 22 centuries ago! Ancient wisdom.

The first thing to know is how to pronounce the book's title: DOW duh jing. Yes, the Ts are pronounced like Ds. DOW duh jing.

The second thing to know is what the book's title means:

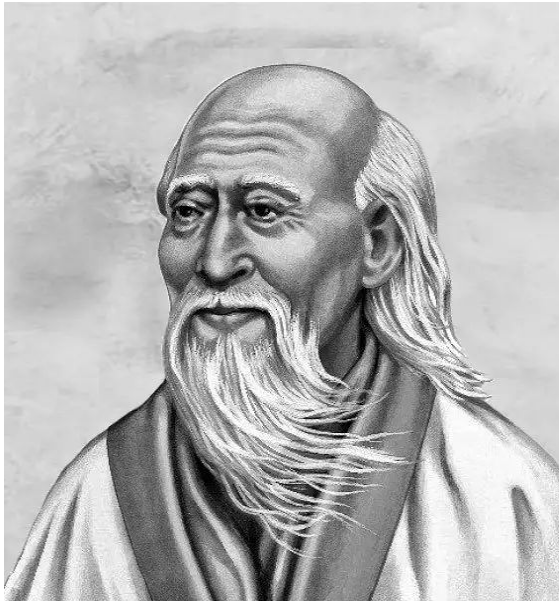
- Tao: The Way
- Te: Righteousness
- Ching: Book

All together now: The Way Righteousness Book, or Book of the Way and Righteousness. It consists of 81 short chapters across two parts.

“Tao” or “The Way” is a bit of a mind-bender because it is not a name for a thing, but rather: **the underlying natural order of the universe** whose ultimate essence is difficult to wrangle due to it being non-conceptual yet evident in one's being alive.

First translated into English in 1868, you can think of *Tao Te Ching* as a spiritual guide for leading a good life. It is one of the early taproots upon which the tree of wisdom grew, e.g. Taoism, Confucianism, etc.

Laozi*



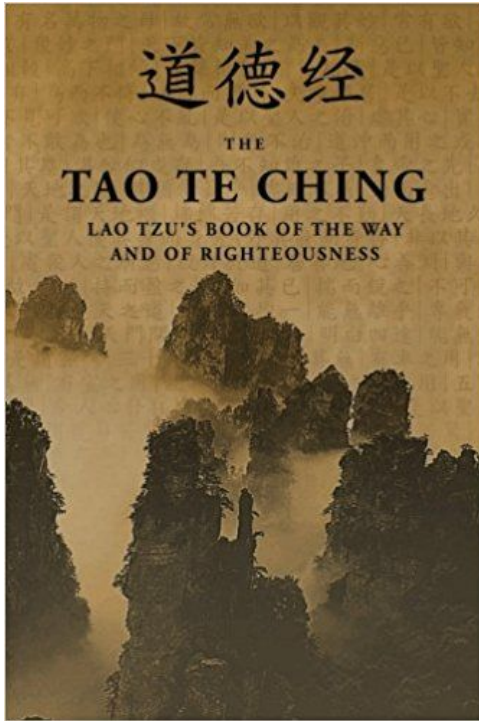
Author bio: [Laozi](#)—also written Lao-Tzu and Lao-Tze—has a simple translation: “old master,” but his story is anything but simple. . .

We believe Laozi was born in 604 BC during the reign of King Ting of the Chan dynasty. Laozi was curator of the royal library of Chan (coolest job ever), but filled with grief over the decadence of the dynasty, he retreated to the mountains in western China like an ancient Chinese Thoreau. The mountainous cliffs were his Walden.

At the frontier a guard recognized Laozi and asked him for a record of his doctrine. What Laozi left for him was *Tao Te Ching*. Awesome, right?!

Laozi's name is pronounced “LAO-zuh” and btw he knew Confucius! Laozi was fifty years older than Confucius (about the same age difference as Socrates and Plato, some 100 years later).

Imagining older Laozi going on walks with younger Confucius made me happy.



A note on translations: *Tao Te Ching* has been translated thousands of times. Given its brevity—only 81 short chapters and ~5,000 Chinese characters—it has become somewhat of a rite of passage puzzle for translators. Therefore, it is only fair that I disclose the version upon which this summary is based:

The
Tao Te Ching
Lao Tzu's Book of the Way and of
Righteousness

Translation and Commentary
By

[Charles Johnston](#) (1867-1931)

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Goal: given the average reader could consume *Tao Te Ching* in 38 minutes, I won't attempt to duly summarize the succinct language and vast wisdom contained within. [Just buy the book](#). I will, however, share how the book influenced me—and has influenced others—as defined as **new action taken**. Talk is cheap, therefore I'm going to *try* to convey how this book has changed people, including myself. After all, *Tao Te Ching* is a code of conduct. A code worth attempting to crack.

I

The first chapter of *Tao Te Ching* is so elegant and powerful that I can't help but just write it for you. I still get goosebumps every time I read it. If you'll permit me to be bold, try reading it *out loud* for yourself:

The way that can be told is not the eternal Way. The word that can be spoken is not the eternal Word.

Unnamed, It is the source of heaven and earth. Named, It is the Mother of all things.

He who is ever without desires sees Its spiritual essence. He who is ever under desire sees only Its limits.

These two, differing in name, are the same in origin. They are the mystery of mysteries. This is the door of spiritual life.

How it influenced me:

- The Greek equivalent of “Tao” or “The Way” in the above passage is the Logos. I read the wiki page.
- I had to remember that at the time *Tao Te Ching* was written, the world was much different: monarchies and religion reigned supreme. They still thought the Earth was flat.
- Desire and attachment create a lot of unhappiness in the world. Humans seem obsessed with comparison, possibly due to our limbic system keeping tabs on social rank (to avoid being ostracized from tribe). This made me sad. “Comparison is the thief of joy,” as they say.
- I don’t use social media, and this passage—particularly the part about desire—reaffirmed my decision because social media just made me desire things I didn’t have.



2

The second chapter of *Tao Te Ching* is equally brilliant, so I’ll just write this one out as well:

When all men have learned the beauty of righteousness, the ugliness of sin is understood.
When all men recognize goodness, then evil is understood.
In the same way, the manifest and unmanifest define each other
Difficult and easy define each other
Long and short reveal each other
Height and depth manifest each other
Musical notes and the tones of the voice determine each other
Former and latter define each other
Therefore the Master works without working.
He teaches in silence.

Then all things come into being, and he gives them fruition.
He brings them into being, yet seeks not to possess them.
He perfects them, yet seeks no reward.
When his work is accomplished, he remains detached from it.
He seeks no glory, and is therefore glorious.

How it influenced me:

- Having drawn Yin and Yang shapes in middle school thinking it was cool, I now realize the concept of duality is totally at work here: it actually emerged ~300 BC as a core tenet of Chinese philosophy and Taoism, and appears in chapter 42 of *Tao Te Ching*.
- There's a quote I hate and love: **success is the best revenge**. While I'm not a vengeful person, for some reason this quote sticks with me. Applied to righteousness, a life well lived is the best legacy. Taking the high road becomes the obvious choice.



On desire & inaction: The next few chapters really drill down into DESIRE and how a good leader, when he/she rules subjects, “empties the heart of desires” and restrains them from “bondage to action.” Here, again, we see the Buddhist theme of detachment at play, along with the very controversial theme of **inaction** (basically antithetical to American / capitalistic ideals).

I also particularly liked a passage from the translator's commentary:

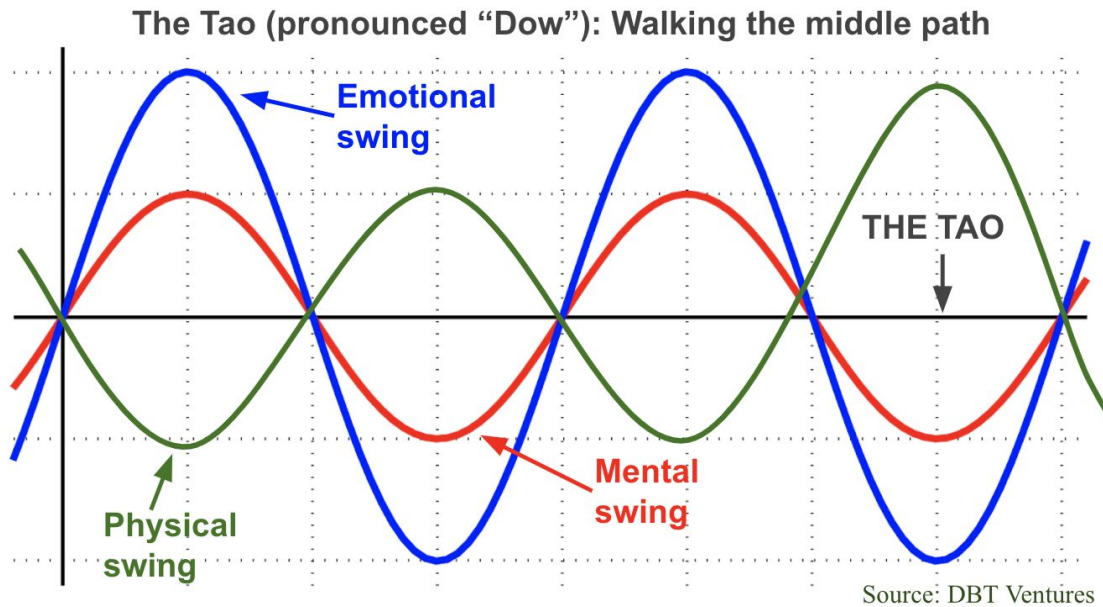
The carnal mind, says Saint Paul, is enmity against God. Therefore, to the carnal mind, the mind full of desire, bound by innumerable appetites and attachments to carnal things, the Way appears not merely empty; it is altogether invisible.

But when, through the revulsion from carnal things, the little spark in the heart begins to seek and to find the Way, then it is found to be an infinite Way, whose treasures are inexhaustible.

How it influenced me:

- Inaction is blasphemous to the ethos of American capitalism. Inaction is also very against my personal nature. So far, inaction has been the hardest principle in *Tao Te Ching* to appreciate. *Not work? Not grow? Not advance? Not strengthen? Not do more?* But yet, it is alluring. It is alluring because it is everything that I'm typically not.
- Therefore, I'm committing to spend a ½ day in October dedicated to DOING NOTHING. No computer, no phone, no people. Just me, in the backyard, maybe meditating, or just looking around. I will experiment with uncomfortable inactivity with hopes of a mind that is “still” and a heart that is “undisturbed.”

On impartiality: “Heaven and earth are without partiality.” Another principle of *Tao Te Ching* is impartiality. If we seek “The Way,” we'd be well-served to think about—and treat things—impartially. I'm reminded of the Stoic discipline of **perception** which, according to Marcus Aurelius, entails absolute objectivity of thought in order to see things *dispassionately* for what they are. I love the word dispassionately. I think impartiality and objectivity are ways to stay *centered*. I recall reading [The Untethered Soul](#) last year and drawing this chart to show how the Tao in the middle, and how life tries to pull us—physically, emotionally, mentally—off the path:



I was swept up again in chapter 8:

8

The spirit of goodness is like water.
Water excels in doing good to all, yet strives not.
It seeks the lowly places rejected by others.
Therefore he who is like this, draws near to the Way.
His chosen dwelling place is in humility.
His heart loves the depth of the abyss.
His gifts are given with impartial love.
He speaks words of faithfulness.
His government brings peace.
He is skilful in all he undertakes.
He acts in all things with timeliness.
He strives against none; therefore he is not opposed.

How it influenced me:

- Water is such a perfect metaphor for all that is humble, nourishing, precious and pure. We should all seek to be more like water! Everytime I fill up my water cup (I'm trying to drink 100 ounces per day, [thank you Daniel Gross](#)) I will call to mind the uniquely wonderful qualities of water as posited in *Tao Te Ching*.

On fame: *Tao Te Ching* claims that fame—and infamy for that matter—should be shunned as base desires. In doing so we will save ourselves great anxiety and apprehension. In the commentary:

So the vanity which seeks fame and popular renown renders a man vulnerable to every breath of popular displeasure, so that there are no such cowards as politicians. He who is quite indifferent to fame will dare all things.

On how to live life:

To show simplicity, keep purity, renounce selfishness, abandon desires. —*Tao Te Ching*, ch. 19



On self-confidence (commentary):

“He who has true self-confidence, gains the trust of the men of his time, even when he is silent. But those who love discussion, who ceaselessly abandon themselves to the intemperance of the tongue, the more they speak, the less they are believed. This distrust comes wholly from the fact that they have no true self-confidence.”

On poise (commentary):

“Lao Tzu wishes men to master their passions through stillness and poise. He who is inwardly poised, is exempt from the levity of the passions; he whose heart is still, cannot be carried away by anger.”

And also:

“We forfeit the throne of angels for temporary pleasures.” —Emerson

63

The wise man works without working,
he is employed without being employed,
he savours that which is without savor.
Great things or small things, many or few, are equal in his eyes.

He repays injuries with kindness.

He begins with easy things when considering hard things;
with little things when planning great things.

The hardest things in the world began of necessity by being easy.

The greatest things in the world began of necessity by being small.

Therefore the Saint seeks not at all to do great things' this is why he can accomplish great things.

He who promises lightly, rarely keeps his word.

He who finds many things easy, of necessity meets many difficulties.

Therefore the Saint finds all things difficult; this is why, to his life's end, he meets with no difficulties.

A few of my favorite passages, highlighted above, can be found in chapter 63 of *Tao Te Ching*. Hard things in life can seem insurmountable. Great things in life can seem unattainable. This chapter reminds us that life's hardest and greatest things all begin with a single step.

The 3rd highlighted line really resonated with me. As a recovering people-pleaser, I have a tendency to say yes and overcommit myself. It drives my wife crazy, and overloads my to-do list at work.

How this chapter influenced me:

- **Think in small steps:** something really hard seems insurmountable? What is the smallest step I can take to begin dealing with it. Something extraordinary seem unattainable? What was the first small step the creator took toward making it a reality? Distill the hardest and greatest things into small steps.
- **Promise less:** I never want to be considered someone who "promises lightly"—that seems like a recipe for disaster, i.e. becoming an unreliable, untrustworthy person. Therefore, I resolve to **treat all promises like big promises**. I think this will lend some gravitas to smaller promises and reduce broken promises.

64

Chapter 64 is famous for one of its lines, highlighted below. It is often misattributed to Confucius who knew Laozi and was 50 years his junior.

. . . .

A tree of mighty trunk springs from a root as thin as a hair;
a tower nine stories high began in a handful of clay;
a journey of a thousand miles began with one step.

He who is absorbed in action fails;

he who attaches himself to anything loses it.

. . . .

81

And finally, the last chapter of *Tao Te Ching*:

Honest words are not ornate; ornate words are not honest.

The man of worth is not glib of speech;

the glib of speech is not a man of worth.
He who knows the Way is not erudite;
he who is erudite knows not the Way.
The Saint lays not up treasure.
The more he spends himself for men, the greater grows his power.
The more he gives to men, the richer he becomes.
Such is the Way of Heaven, which lavishes blessings on all beings and harms none.
Such is the Way of the Saint, who toils, yet without contention.

How this chapter influenced me:

- **Talk less:** if you lead a team, you don't have to be talking all the time. You can say a lot with silence. Sometimes I forget that. Try it in your next 1:1 - when you would typically respond or acknowledge or validate, simply say nothing. It's uncomfortable, but extremely powerful. After all, talk is cheap.

I work with a brilliant colleague named Domenic. When I shared I was reading *Tao Te Ching* with my team, Domenic immediately lit up and exclaimed "The Way!" This made me happy, and Domenic later sent me the below Slack note to share a verse that had influenced him:

Tuesday, October 6th ▾



domenic 2:47 PM

so psyched you called out the tao today! there was a moment during our interview when you asked me about processes and what my philosophy was in building them for my last org--i said that if a process doesn't feel right, then it isn't right. i distilled that from this particular verse on a read a few years ago when i first started operationalizing my team's processes:

When the Tao is lost, there is goodness.
When goodness is lost, there is morality.
When morality is lost, there is ritual.
Ritual is the husk of true faith.
The beginning of chaos.

anyway, little full-circle moment. i'm glad that it's resonated with you 😊

