The Tao-te ching (Classic of the Way and its Power, also transliterated as Daodejing), written in the 6th century BC and attributed to Chinese philosopher Laozi (Lao-tzu), is one of the most influential works in Chinese literature and philosophy. Tao, or Dao, the key term and the subject of the entire work, is translated as 'the way.' The language of the Daode Jing sets it apart from other works of Chinese philosophy of this period; it frequently employs poetic devices such as rhyme and parallel sentences. Its many paradoxical statements reveal a mysticism that contrasted with the more secular and practical focus of Confucianism, the other major system of thought in China at that time.

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From the Tao-te ching

Attributed to Laozi

1
The Tao … that can be told of
Is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.
Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and earth;
Namable, it is the mother of all things.

Always nonexistent,
That we may apprehend its inner secret;
Always existent,
That we may discern its outer manifestations.
These two are the same;
Only as they manifest themselves they receive different names.
That they are the same is the mystery.
Mystery of all mysteries!
The door of all subtleties!

3
Refrain from exalting the worthy,
So that the people will not scheme and contend;
Refrain from prizing rare possessions,
So that the people will not steal;
Refrain from displaying objects of desire,
So that the people's hearts will not be disturbed.

Therefore a sage rules his people thus:
He empties their minds,
And fills their bellies;
He weakens their ambitions,
And strengthens their bones.
He strives always to keep the people innocent of knowledge and desires, and to keep the knowing ones from meddling. By doing nothing that interferes with anything (wu-wei), nothing is left unregulated.

4
The Tao is empty [like a bowl],
It is used, though perhaps never full.
It is fathomless, possibly the progenitor of all things.
It blunts all sharpness,
It unties all tangles;
It is in harmony with all light,
It is one with all dust.
Deep and clear it seems forever to remain.
I do not know whose son it is,
A phenomenon that apparently preceded the Lord.

5
Heaven and earth are not humane:
To them all things are as straw-dogs.
The sage is not humane:
To him all the people are as straw-dogs.

7
The highest good is like water. Water benefits all things generously and is without strife. It dwells in the lowly places that men disdain. Thus it comes near to the Tao.
The highest good loves the [lowly] earth for its dwelling.
It loves the profound in its heart,
It loves humanity in friendship,
Sincerity in speech, order in government,
Effectiveness in deeds, timeliness in action.
Since it is without strife,
It is without reproach.

10
In keeping your soul and embracing unity,
Can you forever hold fast to the Tao?
In letting out your vital force to achieve gentleness,
Can you become as the new-born babe?
In cleansing and purifying your mystic vision,
Can you be free from all dross?
In loving the people and governing the land,
Can you practice nonaction (wu-wei)?
In opening and shutting the gates of Heaven,
Can you play the part of the female?
In perceiving all and comprehending all,
Can you renounce all knowledge?

To beget, to nourish,
To beget but not to claim,
To achieve but not to cherish,
To be leader but not master—
This is called the Mystic Virtue (te).

14
You look at it, but it is not to be seen;
Its name is Formless.
You listen to it, but it is not to be heard;
Its name is Soundless.
You grasp it, but it is not to be held;
Its name is Bodiless.
These three elude all scrutiny,
And hence they blend and become one.

Its upper side is not bright;
Its under side is not dim.
Continuous, unceasing, and unnamable,
It reverts to nothingness.

It is called formless form, thingless image;
It is called the elusive, the evasive.
Confronting it, you do not see its face;
Following it, you do not see its back.

Yet by holding fast to this Tao of old,
You can harness the events of the present.
You can know the beginnings of the past—
Here is the essence of the Tao.

16
Attain utmost vacuity;
Hold fast to quietude.
While the myriad things are stirring together,
I see only their return.
For luxuriantly as they grow,
Each of them will return to its root.

To return to the root is called quietude,
Which is also said to be reversion to one's destiny.
This reversion belongs with the eternal:
To know the eternal is enlightenment;
Not to know the eternal means to run blindly to disaster.

He who knows the eternal is all-embracing;
He who is all-embracing is impartial,
To be impartial is to be kingly,
To be kingly is to be heavenly,
To be heavenly is to be one with the Tao,
To be one with the Tao is to endure forever.
Such a one, though his body perish, is never exposed to danger.

17
The best [government] is that whose existence only is known by the people.
The next is that which is loved and praised. The next is that which is despised.

18
It was when the Great Tao declined,
That there appeared humanity and righteousness.
It was when knowledge and intelligence arose,
That there appeared much hypocrisy.
It was when the six relations lost their harmony,
That there was talk of filial piety and paternal affection.
It was when the country fell into chaos and confusion,
That there was talk of loyalty and trustworthiness.

19
Banish sageliness, discard wisdom,
And the people will be benefited a hundredfold.
Banish humanity, discard righteousness,
And the people will return to filial piety and paternal affection.
Banish skill, discard profit,
And thieves and robbers will disappear.

These three are the ill-provided adornments of life,
And must be subordinated to something higher:—
See the simple, embrace primitivity;
Reduce the self, lessen the desires.

21
The expression of Vast Virtue (te)
Is derived from the Tao alone.
As to the Tao itself,
It is elusive and evasive.
Evasive, elusive,
Yet within it there are images.
Elusive, evasive,
Yet within it there are things.
Shadowy and dim,
Yet within it there is a vital force.
The vital force is very real,
And therein dwells truth.

From the days of old till now,
Its name has never ceased to be,
And it has witnessed the beginning of all things.
How do I know the shape of the beginning of all things?
Through it.

25
There was something nebulous yet complete,
Born before Heaven and earth.
Silent, empty,
Self-sufficient and unchanging,
Revolving without cease and without fail,
It acts as the mother of the world.

I do not know its name,
And address it as "Tao."
Attempting to give it a name, I shall call it "Great."
To be great is to pass on.
To pass on is to go further and further away.
To go further and further away is to return.

Therefore Tao is great, Heaven is great, earth is great,
And the king is also great.
These are the Great Four in the universe,
And the king is one of them.
Man follows the ways of earth,
Earth follows the ways of Heaven;
Heaven follows the ways of Tao;
Tao follows the ways of itself.

28
He who knows the masculine but keeps to the feminine,
Becomes the ravine of the world.
Being the ravine of the world,
He dwells in constant virtue,
He returns to the state of the babe.

He who knows the white but keeps to the black,
Becomes the model of the world.
Being the model of the world,
He rests in constant virtue,
He returns to the infinite.

He who knows glory but keeps to disgrace,
Becomes the valley of the world.
Being the valley of the world,
He finds contentment in constant virtue,
He returns to the uncarved block.

The cutting up of the uncarved block results in vessels,
Which, in the hands of the sage, become officers.
Truly, "A great cutter does not cut."

32
Tao is eternal, nameless. Though the uncarved block seems small, it may be
subordinated to nothing in the world. If kings and barons can preserve it, all
creation would of itself pay homage, Heaven and earth would unite to send
sweet dew, and the people would of themselves achieve peace and
harmony.
Once the block is cut, names appear. When names begin to appear, know then that there is a time to stop. It is by this knowledge that danger may be avoided.

[The spontaneous working of] the Tao in the world is like the flow of the valley brooks into a river or sea….

34
The great Tao flows everywhere:
It can go left; it can go right.

The myriad things owe their existence to it,
And it does not reject them.

When its work is accomplished,
It does not take possession.
It clothes and feeds all,
But does not pose as their master.

Ever without ambition,
It may be called small.
All things return to it as to their home,
And yet it does not pose as their master,
Therefore it may be called Great.

Because it would never claim greatness,
Therefore its greatness is fully realized.

……

37
Tao invariably does nothing (wu-wei),
And yet there is nothing that is not done.

If kings and barons can preserve it,
All things will go through their own transformations.
When they are transformed and desire to stir,
We would restrain them with the nameless primitivity.

Nameless primitivity will result in the absence of desires,
Absence of desires will lead to quietude;
The world will, of itself, find its equilibrium.

……

40
Reversal is the movement of the Tao;
Weakness is the use of the Tao.
All things in the world come into being from being;
Being comes into being from nonbeing.

……

42
Tao gave birth to One; One gave birth to Two; Two gave birth to Three;
Three gave birth to all the myriad things. The myriad things carry the yin
on their backs and hold the yang in their embrace, and derive their harmony from the permeation of these forces. To be "orphaned," "lonely," and "unworthy" is what men hate, and yet these are the very names by which kings and dukes call themselves. Truly, things may increase when they are diminished, but diminish when they are increased. What others teach I also teach: "A man of violence will come to a violent end." This I shall regard as the parent of all teachings.

43
The most yielding of things outruns the most unyielding.
Hence I know the value of nonaction (wu-wei). The instructiveness of silence, the value of nonaction—few in the world are up to this.

48
To seek learning one gains day by day;
To seek the Tao one loses day by day.
Losing and yet losing some more,
Till one has reached doing nothing (wu-wei).
Do nothing and yet there is nothing that is not done.
To win the world one must attend to nothing.
When one attends to this and that,
He will not win the world.

51
Tao gives them birth;
Virtue (te) rears them.
They are shaped by their species;
They are completed by their environment.
Therefore all things without exception exalt Tao and honor Virtue.
Tao is exalted and Virtue is honored,
Not by anyone's command, but invariably and spontaneously.

Therefore it is Tao that gives them birth;
It is Virtue that rears them, makes them grow, fosters them, shelters them.

To give life but not to own,
To achieve but not to cherish,
To lead but not to be master—
This is the Mystic Virtue!

65
The ancient masters in the practice of the Tao did not thereby try to enlighten the people but rather to keep them in ignorance. If the people are difficult to govern, it is because they have too much knowledge. Those who govern a country by knowledge are the country's curse. Those who do not govern a country by knowledge are the country's blessing. To know these two rules is also to know the ancient standard. And to be able to keep the standard constantly in mind is called the Mystic Virtue.
Penetrating and far-reaching is Mystic Virtue! It is with all things as they run their course of reversal, until all reach Great Harmony.

67
All the world says that my Tao is great, yet it appears impertinent. But it is just because it is great that it appears impertinent. Should it appear pertinent, it would have been petty from the start.

Here are my three treasures. Keep them and cherish them. The first is mercy; the second is frugality; the third is never to take the lead over the whole world. Being merciful, one has courage; being frugal, one has abundance; refusing to take the lead, one becomes the chief of all vessels. If one abandons mercy in favor of courage, frugality in favor of abundance, and humility in favor of prominence, he will perish.

Mercy will be victorious in attack and invulnerable in defense. Heaven will come to the rescue of the merciful one and with mercy will protect him.

78
Of all things yielding and weak in the world, None is more so than water. But for attacking what is unyielding and strong, Nothing is superior to it, Nothing can take its place.

That the weak overcomes the strong, And the yielding overcomes the unyielding, Everyone knows this, But no one can translate it into action.

Therefore the sage says: "He who takes the dirt of the country, Is the lord of the state; He who bears the calamities of the country, Is the king of the world." Truth sounds paradoxical!

80
Let there be a small country with a few inhabitants. Though there be labor-saving contrivances, the people would not use them. Let the people mind death and not migrate far. Though there be boats and carriages, there would be no occasion to ride in them. Though there be armor and weapons, there would be no occasion to display them.

Let people revert to the practice of rope-knotting [instead of writing], and be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their houses, and happy with their customs. Though there be a neighboring country in sight, and the people hear each other's cocks crowing and dogs barking, they would grow old and die without having anything to do with each other.

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