

Tao Te Ching

The Book of The Way
and its Virtue



Lao Tzu

A Translation into English by

A. S. KLINE

POETRY IN TRANSLATION

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Please direct sales or editorial enquiries to:

tonykline@poetryintranslation.com



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Book I



Book I



The Way - cannot be told.
The Name - cannot be named.
The nameless is the Way of Heaven and Earth.
The named is Matrix of the Myriad Creatures.
Eliminate desire to find the Way.
Embrace desire to know the Creature.
The two are identical,
But differ in name as they arise.
Identical they are called mysterious,
Mystery on mystery,
The gate of many secrets.



The world knows beauty as beauty,
So there is then ugliness.
The world knows good as good,
So there is then the bad.
*As is and is-not create each other,
The hard and easy define each other,
The long and short delimit each other,
The high and low depend on each other,
Voice and music harmonise with each other,
Last and next follow each other.*
So the wise adhere to action through non-action,
And communicate the teaching without words.
*From the Way come the myriad creatures
Yet it imposes no authority.
It gives them life without possession.
It benefits them but asks no thanks.
It does its work but claims no merit.
Because it claims no merit
Merit is never lacking in it.*



Autumn Storm on the River,
Liu Songnian (16th century)

➤ **III** ➤

Don't give honours to the worthy,
Protect people from ambition.
Don't value scarce things,
Protect the people from envy.
Don't show what's desired,
Keep people from temptation.
So, in governing, the wise
Empty the mind
But fill the stomach,
Weaken ambition
But strengthen the bones,
Keep things free of
Desire and learning,
So the clever take no action.
Act without taking action
And things will be in order.

 **IV** 

The Way is full: use won't empty it.

Deep is the matrix of the myriad creatures.

Blunt the sharp:

Loosen the knots:

Dim the glare:

Follow old tracks.

Shadowy, it seems hardly there.

I don't know whose child it is.

It seems like the ancestral form.



Heaven and earth are ruthless,
Trampling the myriad creatures like straw dogs.
The wise are ruthless,
Considering the people as straw dogs.
The space between earth and heaven,
Isn't it like a bellows?
It's empty but never exhausted.
The more it works the more flows out.
Much speech leads in the end to silence.
Better to hold fast to the Void.

 **VI** 

The spirit of the valley never dies.
It is called the mysterious female.
The gate of the mysterious female
Is called the root of heaven and earth.
Barely seen, it hardly seems there,
Yet use will never exhaust it.



Birds, Rocks and Flowering Prunus,
Zhou Zhimian (late 16th - early 17th century)

 **VII** 

Heaven and Earth endure,
By not endowing themselves with life.
Then they can be long-lived.
So the wise place Self last,
And it comes first,
Call it other than themselves,
And it persists.
By not thinking of Self
The personal goal is achieved.

 **VIII** 

The highest virtue is like water.

Since water helps the myriad creatures,

And settles, without contention,

Where no one wishes to live,

It is near to the Way.

In a house position matters.

In mental quality depth matters.

In friends kindness matters.

In speaking honesty matters.

In government order matters.

In transactions ability matters.

In actions promptness matters.

By not contending it never errs.



Fishermen in Conversation,
Ma Yuan (late 15th - early 16th century)

 **IX** 

Rather than filling it overfull
Better to stop in time.
Sharpen it to a point
The edge won't last forever.
Gold and jade may fill the house
But no one can retain them.
Boasting of wealth and virtue,
Brings trouble on oneself.
Reticence when the job is done,
Is the Way of heaven.



Carrying your spiritual body on your head
Can you embrace the One and not let go?
Concentrating the breath
Can you become supple as a child?
Can you polish the mysterious mirror
And leave no mark?
Can you love the people and rule the state
Without indulging in action?
When the gates of heaven open and close,
Can you keep to the female role?
When your mind penetrates the four directions
Are you able to know nothing?
It gives them life and nurtures.
It gives them life without possession.
It benefits them but asks no thanks.
It holds but imposes no authority.
Such is the mysterious virtue.

 **XI** 

Thirty spokes

Round one hub.

Employ the nothing inside

And you can use a cart.

Knead the clay to make a pot.

Employ the nothing inside

And you can use a pot.

Cut out doors and windows.

Employ the nothing inside

And you can use a room.

What is achieved is something.

By employing nothing it can be used.

 **XII** 

The five colours blind us.

The five notes deafen us.

The five tastes deaden us.

Pursuing and catching

Disturb the mind.

Wanting scarce things

Delays our progress.

So the wise are:

For the stomach

And not the eye.

Taking the one, they leave the other.

 **XIII** 

Favour and loss of it both disturb us.

Rank and body are both a problem.

What's meant by 'favour and loss of it both disturb us'?

Favour disturbs the subject when it's given

As much as it does when it's taken away.

That's what's meant by 'favour and loss of it both disturb us'.

What's meant by 'rank and body are both a problem'?

I've problems because I have a body.

When I've no body where's my problem?

Who values the body even more than the empire,

Can be trusted with the empire.

Who loves the body even more than the empire,

Can be a custodian of the empire.

➤ **XIV** ➤

What cannot be seen is called indistinguishable.
What cannot be heard is called indistinct.
What cannot be touched is called indefinite.
The three can't be comprehended
So they're confused and considered one.
Its surface is not bright.
Its depths are not obscured.
Dimly seen it can't be named
So returns to the insubstantial.
This is the shapeless shape,
The form without substance.
This is called blurred and shadowy.
Approach it you can't see its face.
Follow it you can't see its back.
Hold fast to the ancient Way
In order to control the present.
Knowing the source of the ancient,
Is the thread that runs through the Way.

➤ **XV** ➤

He who knew the way of old
Was delicately subtle, mysteriously knowing,
Too deep to be understood.
Because he could not be understood
He can only be vaguely described:
Tentative, as if crossing a rushing river,
Alert, as if afraid of his neighbours,
Stiff, like a guest,
Fluid, like thawing ice,
Dense, like the un-carved block,
Empty, like the valley,
Turbid, like muddy water.
Who can be turbid, yet gradually clear?
Who can be still, yet gradually stir into life?
One who holds fast to the Way
Does not desire completeness.
Because they do not desire completeness
They can be worn, and not renewed.

 **XVI** 

I try my best to achieve emptiness.
I hold firmly to stillness.
The myriad creatures rise together
And I watch them return.
The myriad things flourish
And each returns to its root.
Returning to the root is silence.
Silence is returning to being.
Returning to being is knowing the constant.
Knowing the constant is enlightenment.
Acting without knowing
The constant is harmful.
Acting while knowing
The constant is balance.
Balance leads to nobility,
Nobility to what is above,
What is above to the Way,
The Way to the eternal.
To the end of life
There is no danger.

Tao Te Ching



Birds and Flowers of Early Spring,
ca. 1500

 **XVII** 

The greatest ruler is one they know from of old.

The next is one they love and praise.

The next is one they fear.

The next is one they despise.

Where there is lack of faith,

There is a lack of respect.

Employ reticence, and care with words.

When the work is done and the task complete

The people will say: 'It just happened.'

 **XVIII** 

When the great Way is lost
There is 'benevolence and rectitude'.
When cleverness appears
There is 'great ritual'.
When the family is not harmonious,
There is 'filial piety'.
When the state is in chaos
There are 'loyal' ministers.

 **XIX** 

Eliminate the 'sage': forget 'wisdom'
People will be a hundred times better off.
Eliminate 'benevolence': forget 'rectitude',
And people will have filial piety.
Eliminate cleverness: forget profit,
And there'll be less thieves and rogues.
Superficial things are insufficient,
What is needed is all-embracing.
Exhibit the unadorned.
Hold fast to the un-carved block.
Avoid the thought of Self.
Eliminate desire.



Eliminate learning; and there's no worry.
Between 'yes' and 'no', what's the difference?
What separates 'good' and 'bad'?
But one must respect what others respect.
The people are happy
As if at a marvellous feast,
Or going on a spring outing,
Only I am unmoved and silent,
Abandoned to disorder without limit.
Like a baby that's not yet smiled,
Aimless, like one of the homeless.
The people have all they want,
It's only me that's in need,
My mind's ignorant – so dull!
Yet the crowd are clear-minded,
It's only me that's muddled.
Yet the crowd are all-knowing,
Only from me it's hidden.
Levelled flat like the ocean,
Like an endless wind blowing.
Everyone has a purpose.
It's only me that's raw and foolish.
I'm different from the others.
I like being fed by the Mother!

 **XXI** 

Great virtue follows the Way
And the Way alone.
How shadowy, how indistinct!
Within it is the form.
How shadowy, how indistinct!
Within it is the 'thing'.
How dim, how dark!
Within it is the substance.
The substance is perfectly real,
Within, it can be tested.
From present to ancient times
Its name was never lost.
So we can investigate the origins of all.
How do I know the origins of all are that?
By means of this.

 **XXII** 

Bowed down and so preserved.

Bent and then straightened.

Hollowed out then filled.

Worn away then renewed.

From the few achievement

From the many confusion.

So the wise grasp the One

And become a pattern for all.

Not shown, therefore apparent,

Not asserted, therefore known,

Not boasted of, therefore of worth,

Not contentious, so enduring.

It's because the wise do not contend,

That no one can contend with them.

When the ancients said:

'Bowed down and so preserved'

That was no empty saying.

It allows one to be preserved

To the end.

➤ **XXIII** ➤

To speak infrequently

Is natural.

So a strong wind won't last all morning,

A downpour won't last all day.

What causes these? Heaven and earth.

If even heaven and earth must rest,

How much more so human beings?

Therefore align yourself to the Way.

Aligned with the Way you are one with the Way.

Aligned with virtue you are one with virtue.

Aligned with the heavens you are one with the heavens.

The Way accepts this alignment gladly.

Virtue accepts this alignment gladly.

The heavens accept this alignment gladly.

When there is lack of faith

There is a lack of respect.

Tao Te Ching



Landscape in the style of Li Tang,
Lan Ying (1585 - 1664)

➤ **XXIV** ➤

On tiptoes you can't stand.

Straddled you can't walk.

Shown, therefore not apparent,

Asserted, therefore not known,

Boasted of, therefore not of worth,

Contentious, so not enduring.

The Way calls these

'Excess food and useless waste'

As things dislike them,

Those of the Way do not employ them.

 **XXV** 

*There is something formed of chaos,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void, it is not renewed,
It goes on forever without failing
It can be seen as the World-Mother.
I don't know its name.
So I have to call it the Way.
I have to label it as 'the great'.
Being great implies a distancing
Distancing implies being far-off,
Being far-off implies returning.
So the Way is great: heaven is great:
Earth is great: the ruler is great.
Within the realm four things are great,
And the ruler is one.
The ruler reflects the earth
Earth reflects the heavens
The heavens reflect the Way
The Way reflects what is.*

 **XXVI** 

Heaviness is the root of lightness:
The still is ruler of the turbulent.
So the nobleman travels all day
Without losing sight of the heavy wagons.
When he's secure behind walls and towers,
Then he's at rest and without trouble.
How can a ruler of ten thousand chariots,
Treat the people lightly in his thoughts?
In lightness the root is lost:
In turbulence the ruler is lost.

 **XXVII** 

Expert travelling leaves no track:
Expert speaking is free of faults.
Expert counting uses no beads.
Expert closing stays shut without locks.
Expert tying is firm without knots.
So the wise are expert in utilising people
And discarding no one,
Expert in utilising things
And discarding nothing.
This is called the application of knowledge.
So the wise are teachers the ignorant learn from,
And the ignorant are material for the wise.
Not to value the teacher,
Not to love the material,
Though it seems clever
Reveals confusion.
This is called the essential secret.

 **XXVIII** 

Know the masculine
But keep to the feminine,
And be a valley to the realm.
If you are a valley to the realm
Then constant virtue won't leave you,
And you will return to infancy.
Know the bright
But keep to the shadows,
And be a pattern for the realm.
If you are a pattern for the realm
Then constant virtue will not be lacking
And you will return to the unlimited.
Know the glorious
But keep to the humble
And be a valley to the realm.
If you are a valley to the realm
Then constant virtue will be complete
And you will return to the un-carved block.
The un-carved block is cut into 'vessels'.
Wise men use them, as rulers of 'vessels'.
The great cutter
Does not cut away.

 **XXIX** 

Whoever takes hold of the realm
And wants to manipulate it
Will have no peace.
The realm is a sacred vessel
That should not be interfered with.
Whoever touches it will spoil it.
Whoever grasps it will lose it.
Some lead and some follow,
Some breathe easily, some breathe hard,
Some are strong and some are weak,
Some destroy: some are destroyed.
So the wise avoid excess,
Avoid the pompous, and the arrogant.



Ruling the people by means of the Way
Does not involve awing the realm with force.

That's likely to come full circle.

Where the general camped

There the brambles grow.

In the wake of a great army

Bad harvests inevitably follow.

The good man aims at ending war,

And doing so fears to intimidate.

Achieve the aim but don't boast.

Achieve the aim without display.

Achieve the aim without arrogance.

Achieve the aim but don't assert it.

Achieve the aim but don't intimidate.

The creature that ignores what exists from of old

Is described as going against the Way.

What goes against the Way

Will come to a swift end.



Tao Yuanming and the Pine Tree,
early 15th century

 **XXXI** 

Since weapons are instruments of evil,
And people detest them,
A wise man can't stand their use.
A gentleman, in his house,
Makes the left the place of honour.
In military matters
The right is the place of honour.
Since weapons are instruments of evil,
They are not the instruments of the gentleman.
When he is forced to use them
He does so without savouring it.
Victory is not glorious,
Those for whom it is glorious
Delight in killing human beings.
Those who delight in killing human beings
Will never control the realm.
The left takes precedence on joyous occasions.
The right takes precedence on sad occasions.
A lieutenant's place is on the left.
A general's place is on the right.
Mourning rites are observed.
When there are mounds of dead
One should weep with sorrow.
When one is victorious
Observe the mourning rites.

 **XXXII** 

The Way has no name.

The un-carved block is small

But no one dares to claim it.

If the rulers could accept this

The myriad creatures would submit of themselves,

Heaven and earth would unite

And the sweet dew would fall.

The people could be dealt with

Without the making of laws.

When it is carved there are names.

When there are names it is time to stop.

Knowing when to stop

Keeps one from danger.

The world's relation to the Way

Is like rills and streams

To the River and Sea.

 **XXXIII** 

One who understands others is clever.

One who understands the 'self' is enlightened.

One who conquers others is forceful.

One who conquers the 'self' is strong.

One who can be content is rich.

One who can act with purpose has will.

One who doesn't lose place endures.

One who dies without loss has lived a life.

 **XXXIV** 

The Way is broad like a river.

How can it be deflected to left or right?

The myriad creatures depend on it for life

Yet it imposes no authority.

It does its work but claims no merit.

It feeds and clothes the people

Without claiming to rule them.

Free of desires it can be called 'small'.

Yet as the myriad creatures turn to it,

And it does not claim to rule them,

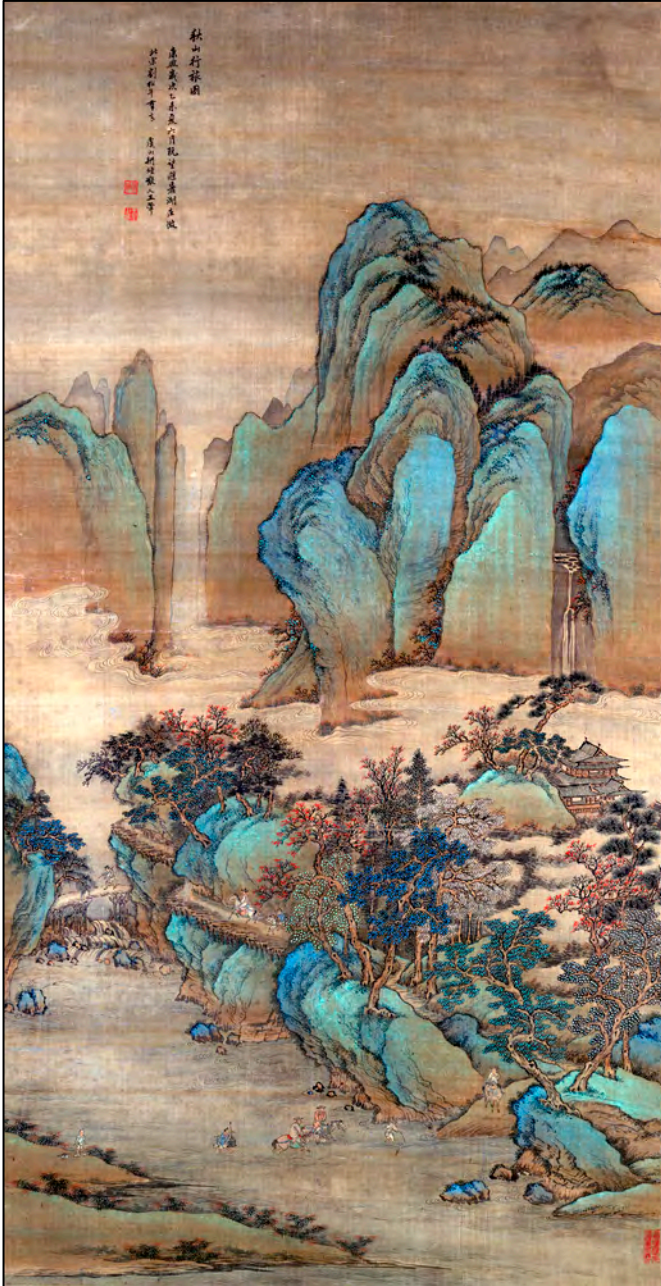
It can be called 'great'.

Because it never regards itself as great

It is capable of being great.

 **XXXV** 

Hold on to the great Image
And people will travel along.
Travelling along without harm
They will exist in peace.
Music and food tempt
The passer-by to stop.
The Way passes into the mouth
Without any flavour.
Look and it cannot be seen.
Listen, it cannot be heard.
Yet it cannot be exhausted.



Travellers in Autumn Mountains,
Wang Hui (1632 - 1717)

 **XXXVI** 

In order to shrink it
It has to be stretched.
In order to weaken it
It has to be strong.
In order to raze it
You have to build it.
In order to take from it
You have to give to it.
This is called subtle understanding.
The soft and gentle conquers
The hard and violent.
The fish should not abandon the depths.
The state's rewards and punishments
Should not be open to everyone.

 **XXXVII** 

The Way is always inaction,
But nothing is left undone.
If the rulers could realise it
The people would be themselves transformed.
If, being transformed, they show desire
I restrain it by means of the un-carved block.
The nameless un-carved block
Is freedom from desire.
Without desire they are calm,
And the realm is of itself at peace.

Book II



 **XXXVIII** 

The highest virtue doesn't practise virtue
That's why it is virtuous.
The lowest virtue is always 'virtuous'
That's why it has no virtue.
The highest virtue is inaction
But nothing is left undone.
The lowest virtue is action
But things are always left undone.
Benevolence is acting
But without ulterior motives.
Rectitude is acting
But with ulterior motives.
Those steeped in the rites act,
And when no one responds,
They roll up their sleeves
And resort to threats.
So when the Way was lost
There was 'virtue'.
When virtue was lost
There was benevolence.
When benevolence was lost
There was rectitude.
When rectitude was lost
There were the rites.

Tao Te Ching

The rites are only the semblance

Of loyalty and sincerity,

And a source of disorder.

The seer is a flowery decoration

Obscuring the Way,

And a source of foolishness.

So the wise live in the substance

And not in the semblance.

In the fruit

And not in the flower.

They take the one, and leave the other.

 **XXXIX** 

Of old these possess Oneness:

Heaven because of the One is clear.

Earth because of the One is firm.

Powers because of the One have force.

Valleys because of the One are filled.

People because of the One subsist.

Rulers because of the One can govern.

The One creates these effects.

If heaven was not clear it might shatter.

If earth was not firm it might subside.

If powers had no force they might be exhausted.

If the valley was not filled it might run dry.

If people lacked subsistence they might perish.

If rulers could not govern they might fall.

So the superior has the inferior as root.

The higher has the lower at its base.

So rulers call themselves 'abandoned, humble, and unfortunate'.

Is this not taking the inferior as root?

So the highest effect is not a burden,

Neither desiring to be rare like jade,

Nor solitary like a rock.

 **XL** 

Returning is how the Way progresses.
Weakness is how it performs its function.
The myriad creatures arise from Something,
And Something arises from Nothing.



Egrets, Small Birds, Willows and Peach Blossoms,
Zhao Yong (b. 1289)

 **XLI** 

*When the best students hear of the Way
They try zealously to put it into practice.
When average students hear of the Way
It's sometimes here and sometimes gone.
When the worst students hear of the Way
They burst out laughing.
Not laughing would make it
Unworthy to be called the Way.
So the ancient text says:
The way that is bright seems dull.
The way forward seems to lead back.
The smooth way seems rough.
The highest virtue seems a valley.
The purest whiteness seems stained.
Excessive virtue seems defective.
Solid virtue seems inactive.
Simplicity appears sullied.
The great square has no corners.
The great vessel takes long to fashion.
The great note is soundless.
The great image has no form.
The Way hides in namelessness.
It is good at giving and perfecting.*

➤ **XLII** ◀

The Way creates one: one creates two:
Two creates three: three creates every being.
All beings carry the *yin* on their back
And embrace the *yang* in their arms,
Their gentleness achieves harmony.
Men hate the words 'abandoned, humble, and unfortunate'
Yet rulers call themselves by these names.
So things are sometimes augmented
By being diminished,
And diminished by addition.
I teach what others also teach:
'The violent won't die a natural death.'
I adopt this as my basic principle.

➤ **XLIII** ⚡

The softest thing in the world
Subdues the hardest thing in the world.
Non-being enters impenetrable space.
That is why I know the power of non-action.
Very few people in the world
Know how to teach without words
And profit from non-action.

 **XLIV** 

Which is dearer
Your fame or your self?
Which is more precious
Your self or possessions?
Which is worse
To gain or to lose?
So, great love
Leads to great sacrifice.
Great riches
Lead to great losses.
Know what is sufficient
And you won't be humbled.
Know when to stop
And you'll be free from danger.
Then you'll last a long time.

 **XLV** 

Great perfection seems flawed.
Yet use will not diminish it.
Great fullness seems empty
Yet use will not exhaust it.
Great straightness seems bent.
Great skill seems awkward.
Great eloquence seems stilted.
Movement overcomes cold.
Stillness overcomes heat.
Clear and calm,
One can be a ruler of the realm.



Red Camellia, Plum, Bamboo and Wild Birds,
Shen Wuji (ca. 1620 - 1660)

➤ **XLVI** ⚡

When the Way reigns in the land,
Horses go back to ploughing the fields.
When the Way does not reign in the land,
War-horses breed on the frontiers.
There's no crime worse
Than to pander to one's desires.
There's no sickness worse
Than not knowing what is enough.
There's no greater catastrophe
Than the lust for gain.
Whoever knows what is enough
Will be happy with his fate.

 **XLVII** 

You can know the universe
Without leaving your house.
You can see the ways of heaven
Without looking out of your window.
The further you go
The less you know.
That's why the wise achieve without moving,
Name what is, without needing to see it,
Accomplish great things without action.

 **XLVIII** 

In pursuing one's studies
Something's added each day.
In practising the Way
Something's subtracted each day.
It grows less and less
Until one reaches non-action.
When one reaches non-action
Nothing is left undone.
It's always through not interfering
That one can control the realm.
Whoever loves to interfere
Will never control the people.

 **XLIX** 

The wise have no fixed opinion.
They take the peoples' opinion as their own.
Those who are good I treat as good.
Those who are bad I treat as good.
That's the perfection of goodness.
Those who are honest I treat as honest.
Those who are dishonest I treat as honest.
That's the perfection of honesty.
Among the people the wise reserve their opinion
And live in harmony with them.
The multitude satisfy their eyes and ears,
And the wise treat them as little children.

Tao Te Ching



Two Boys Playing in a Garden with Sheep,
Zhao Yong (b. 1289)



Pursuing life and pursuing death
A third will be followers of life,
A third will be followers of death.
And a third chase life into the realms of death.
Why? Because they want to live to excess.
I've heard that those who control their life,
Never encounter tigers or rhinos on their travels,
Are never harmed by weapons when in a fight.
There's nowhere for the rhino to plant its horn.
There's nowhere for the tiger to set its claw.
There's nowhere for the weapon to lodge its blade.
Why? Because they've abolished the realm of death.



The Way creates them.

Virtue raises them.

Things shape them.

Events mature them.

So the myriad creatures value the Way

And all honour virtue.

The Way is valued and virtue honoured

Not by force, but of its nature.

So the Way creates them and raises them,

Rears them and nourishes them,

Develops and matures them,

Feeds and shelters them.

It gives them life without possession.

It benefits them but asks no thanks.

It holds but imposes no authority.

Such is the mysterious virtue.

 **LII** 

All things have an origin.
The origin could be called the Mother.
When you know the Mother,
You can know the child.
When you know the child,
Return to clasp the Mother,
And you'll find no danger
To the end of your life.
Block up the openings.
Shut the doors,
And you'll not fail
To the end of your life.
Unblock the openings,
Add to your problems,
You'll be beyond help
To the end of your life.
To see the subtle is called discernment.
To hold to the weak is called strength.
Use discernment but return to the light.
This is called pursuing the constant.

☯ **LIII** ☯

If I had a little knowledge
I'd walk the great Way,
And only fear straying from it.
The great Way is broad,
But people like sidetracks.
*The Court is immaculate
But the fields are full of weeds.
The barns are empty
But the rulers are finely dressed,
Swords by their sides,
Gorged with food and drink,
Owning too much wealth.
This is called glorious theft.
This is far away from the Way.*

➤ **LIV** ➤

The well-rooted cannot be dislodged.

The tightly-held will not be lost.

Generation after generation

Worship their ancestors forever.

Cultivate it in yourself

Its virtue will be real.

Cultivate it in the family

Its virtue will overflow.

Cultivate it in the village

Its virtue will extend.

Cultivate it in the state

Its virtue will flourish.

Cultivate it in the realm

Its virtue will be all-pervasive.

Assess the self by considering yourself.

Assess the family by considering the family.

Assess the village by considering the village.

Assess the state by considering the state.

Assess the realm by considering the realm.

How do I know the realm is like that?

By means of this.

✈ LV ✈

One who possesses true virtue
Is like a new-born infant.
Poisonous insects won't sting it.
Savage creatures won't bite it.
Birds of prey won't claw it.
Though its bones are weak,
And its muscles feeble,
Its grip is still strong.
Though it doesn't know about sexual union
Its sexual parts are already active,
This is because it has perfect vitality.
It cries all day without becoming hoarse,
This is because it's in perfect harmony.
To know this harmony is called the constant.
To know the constant is called enlightenment.
Fuelling the vital spirits is called disastrous.
Mind impelling the breath is called violence.
The creature that ignores what exists from of old
Is described as going against the Way.
What goes against the Way
Will come to a swift end.



Eagle in a Landscape Setting,
late 15th – early 16th century

 **LVI** 

One who knows does not speak.

One who speaks does not know.

Block up the openings.

Shut the doors,

Blunt the sharp:

Loose the knots:

Dim the glare:

Follow old tracks.

This is called mysterious oneness.

You can't possess it but can't escape it.

You can't benefit it or harm it.

You can't honour it or debase it.

So it's valued throughout the realm.

➤ **LVII** ➤

Govern the state by being honest.

Wage war by being clever.

Achieve the realm by not meddling.

How do I know it is like that? By this:

The more regulations

The poorer the people.

The more sharp weapons

The more troubled the country.

The cleverer the people

The more distractions.

The wider the knowledge of law,

The more there are thieves and rogues.

So the wise say:

I take no action and the people transform themselves.

I remain still and the people set themselves right.

I don't interfere and the people themselves prosper.

I am free of desires and the people of themselves

Hold to the un-carved block.

➤ **LVIII** ➤

When government meanders
The people are straightforward.
When government interferes
The people are cunning.
The fortunate leans on the unfortunate,
The unfortunate crouches beneath the fortunate.
Who knows when to stop?
Where is the simple?
The simple becomes cunning,
The good becomes perverse.
The people have certainly
Been wrong for a long time!
So the wise are foursquare
But not sharp.
Have corners
But don't cut.
Extend themselves
But spare others.
Shine out
But don't glare.

➤ **LIX** ◀

In governing the people and serving heaven
Moderation is best in a ruler.
By being moderate
One starts from the Way.
Starting from the Way
One gains a wealth of virtue.
Gaining a wealth of virtue
There is nothing that can't be overcome.
When there's nothing that can't be overcome
There are no limitations.
When there are no limitations
The realm can be achieved.
When the mother of the realm is achieved,
One endures.
This is called 'deep roots and a firm stem'
Through which one acquires long life.

➤ **LX** ➤

Ruling a large state is like boiling a delicate fish.
When the realm is governed by the Way
Malicious influences lose their power.
Or rather they retain their power
But cause the people no harm.
Neither they nor the wise
Cause the people harm.
Since neither harms the people
Their merit is one and the same.



Summer Landscape,
Dong Xiaochu (1632)

 **LXI** 

A large state should be the estuary of a river,
Where all the streams of the world come together.
In the coming together of the world
The female overcomes the male by weakness.
Being weak she takes the lower position.
So a large state taking the lower position
Allies itself with a small state.
A small state taking the lower position
Is allied with a large state.
One by taking the lower position allies itself,
The other by taking the lower position is allied.
All the large state wishes
Is to join with and nourish the other.
All the small state wishes
Is for its services to be accepted by the other.
In order to achieve what they wish
The great adopt the lower position.

➤ **LXII** ◀

The Way is the myriad creatures' refuge.

It is that which the good extend,

And that which defends the bad.

Eloquent words can win promotion.

Eloquent actions can elevate.

Even if a person is bad, should one reject them?

When the ruler is installed

And the three great ministers appointed,

Though jade disks

And four-horse teams are offered,

It's better to grant the gift of the Way

Without stirring from one's place.

Why was the Way valued of old?

Was it not said it brought achievement,

And mitigated the punishment of the guilty.

So it was prized by the realm.

➤ **LXIII** ⚡

Do what involves no action.
Promote things without meddling.
Savour what has no flavour.
Make the small, great
And the few, many.
Counter harm with virtue.
Tackle the difficult while it's still easy,
Address the great while it's still small.
Difficult things have easy beginnings,
Great things have small beginnings.
Because the wise never try to be great,
That is how they achieve greatness.
Rash promises are rarely fulfilled.
Thinking things easy makes them difficult.
The wise treat things as if they were difficult.
And so are not overcome by difficulties.

 **LXIV** 

*It's easy to control what is at rest.
It's easy to handle what's not yet developed.
It's easy to shatter what's still un-tempered.
It's easy to disperse what's still limited.
Deal with things before they grow.
Manage affairs before they're chaotic.
A tree as wide as a man's arms
Grows from a tiny seed.
A tower nine stories high
Rises from piles of earth.
A journey of a thousand miles
Starts with a single step.
Whoever meddles with things ruins them.
Whoever grasps things loses them.
The wise by non-action ruin nothing.
By not grasping they lose nothing.
People in their projects
Fail on the brink of success.
Be as careful at the end as the start
And failure will be avoided.
So the wise desire to be free of desire,
And place no value on what is scarce:
Learn how to exist without learning,
And correct the faults of the many:
Help all things to conform to nature,
And avoid the rashness of action.*

➤ LXV ➤

Those of old who were skilled in the Way
Did not use it to enlighten people,
But rather to maintain simplicity.
When people are difficult to govern
It's because they've become too clever.

Governing the state by cleverness

Is a disaster for the state.

Not to govern a state by cleverness

Is a blessing for the state.

These are the givens.

To always understand the given,

Is called mysterious virtue.

Mysterious virtue is deep and profound.

When things return to the given, it returns.

And only then are things in complete accord.

 **LXVI** 

The reason why River and Sea can be
The rulers of the hundred valleys
Is because they adopt the lower position.
So they can command the hundred valleys.
*In order to command people
You should be humble with them.
If you want to lead people
You should follow behind.*
So the wise command the people
But avoid being a burden.
They go in front of the people
But cause no obstruction.
Therefore the realm gladly upholds them,
And never resents doing so.
Because they do not contend
No one in the realm contends with them.

 **LXVII** 

The whole world calls my Way vast
And says it resembles nothing else.

It is precisely because it is vast
That it resembles nothing else.

If it resembled something else
How could it be anything but small?

I have three treasures

I hold to and cherish.

The first is compassion,

The second is moderation,

The third is called not rashly

Taking the lead in the realm.

Being compassionate I can show courage,

Being moderate I can be generous,

Not rashly taking the lead

I can command the officials.

Courage without compassion,

Generosity without moderation,

Going in front instead of behind,

Is certain to end in destruction.

With compassion you will win in war

And be impregnable in peace.

Heaven will protect you

With the gift of compassion.



Pair of Doves,
14th century

 **LXVIII** 

The greatest warrior is not formidable.

The greatest fighter is never angry.

The best strategist never encounters the enemy.

The best employer of talent is humble.

This is known as the power of non-contention.

This is known as respecting others' talents.

This is known as echoing the profundity of heaven.

 **LXIX** 

The strategists say:

'It's rash to play the host: I prefer to play the guest.

It's rash to go forward an inch, I retreat a foot instead.'

This is known as advancing without moving,

Rolling up one's sleeve without an arm,

Meeting an enemy by force without an enemy,

And waging war without a battle.

There's nothing worse than treating war lightly.

Doing that will lose me all my treasure.

When two opponents encounter each other,

The one that is most regretful will win.

 **LXX** 

My words are easy to understand
And easy to put into practice,
Yet no one can understand them
Or put them into practice.
Words must have an origin
And actions must have a guide.
People ignorant of this
Fail to understand me.
Those who understand are few:
Those who ignore me are celebrated.
So the wise though meanly dressed,
Hide priceless jade on their person.

 **LXXI** 

To know without thinking one knows is best.
Not to know but to think one knows is harmful.
It is by being aware of harm that one avoids it.
The wise person does not come to harm.
It is because the wise are aware of harm
That they avoid coming to harm.

Tao Te Ching



Laozi Passing the Barrier,
late 15th – early 16th century

➤ **LXXII** ⚡

When people don't respect what is powerful
Things have the power to overcome them.
Don't press down on their lives,
Don't constrict their livelihood.
It's because you don't oppress them,
That they won't weary of the burden.
So the wise know themselves,
But don't make a display of themselves,
Love themselves
But don't over-value themselves.
Taking the one, they leave the other.

 **LXXIII** 

One who's fearless in being brave will be killed.
One who's fearless in being cautious remains alive.
One of these is useful, the other harmful.
Heaven disdains what it disdains
Who knows the reasons why?
Even the wise find these things difficult.
The way of heaven
Overcomes easily without contention,
Replies though it does not speak,
Invites though it does not summon,
Obeys the laws though it seems free.
The net of heaven is vast.
The mesh is wide
But nothing slips through.

 **LXXIV** 

If people don't fear death
How will you frighten them with death?
If people always fear death
And I seize and executee who does anything new,
Who will dare to move?
There is a public executioner who kills.
Killing on behalf of the public executioner,
Is called cutting wood on behalf of the carpenter.
In cutting wood on behalf of the carpenter,
There are few who escape hurting their hands.

 **LXXV** 

The people are starving.

It's because their rulers over-tax them

That the people are starving.

The people are hard to govern.

It's because their rulers are quick to act

That people are hard to govern.

The people treat death lightly.

It's because people over-value life

That they treat death lightly.

It's because one sets no store by life,

That one is wiser than those who do.

 **LXXVI** 

We are supple and weak when born,
And hard and stiff when dead.
Trees and grass are supple and tender shoots,
But dry and withered when dead.
The hard and stiff are companions of death.
The supple and weak are companions of life.
The stiffly held weapon will not conquer.
Hard wood will fall to the axe.
The tall and stiff is of inferior rank.
The supple and weak is of superior rank.

 **LXXVII** 

The Way of heaven is like stringing a bow.

It depresses the high,

And raises the low.

It takes from excess,

And gives to the lacking.

It's heaven's Way

To take from excess

And give to the lacking.

People do otherwise.

They take from those who lack

And give to those with excess.

Who can take his excess

And give it to the realm?

One who knows the Way.

So the wise do good but ask no thanks.

They do their work but claim no merit.

They do not wish to display their virtue.

 **LXXVIII** 

Nothing in the world is weaker or gentler than water.
But nothing exceeds it at conquering the hard and strong.
That is because nothing displaces it.
*That the weak overcomes the strong,
And the gentle overcomes the hard,
Is something that everyone knows
But no one can put into practice.*

So the wise say:
*One who takes on himself the state's humility
Is called a ruler worthy of its institutions.
One who takes on himself the state's adversity,
Is called a ruler worthy of governing the realm.*

*True words
Seem perverse.*



Pair of Mandarin Ducks on a Snowy Bank,
late 15th - early 16th century

 **LXXIX** 

When there is peace between great enemies

There is bound to be lingering resentment.

How can this be considered virtuous?

So the wise become creditors

But exact no payment from the people.

The virtuous keep the tally,

Those without virtue exact it.

The Way of heaven shows no favouritism.

It merely supports the good.

 **LXXX** 

Let states and their population be small in size.

Let the people, though they have weapons

For an army, not use them.

Let them take death seriously

And not wander to far-off places.

Though they have boats and wagons

Let them not find a use for them.

Though they have weapons and armour

Let them have no occasion to show them.

Return them to measuring with a knotted rope,

They'll find savour in their food,

And good-taste in their clothing,

Find contentment in their homes

And be happy with their lives.

Though the next state can be seen

And its barking and cock crows heard,

The people of one state will age and die

Without having to deal with the other.

 **LXXXI** 

True words are rarely elaborate.

Elaborate words are rarely truthful.

Good words are rarely eloquent.

Eloquent words are rarely good.

He who knows is rarely learned.

He who is learned rarely knows.

The wise do not hoard wisdom.

Giving to others what they have

They have still more.

Sharing what they have with others

They are richer still.

Heaven's Way helps and never harms.

The Way of the wise is generous

And free from all contention.

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About the Translator

Anthony Kline lives in England. He graduated in Mathematics from the University of Manchester, and was Chief Information Officer (Systems Director) of a large UK Company, before dedicating himself to his literary work and interests. He was born in 1947. His work consists of translations of poetry; critical works, biographical history with poetry as a central theme; and his own original poetry. He has translated into English from Latin, Ancient Greek, Classical Chinese and the European languages. He also maintains a deep interest in developments in Mathematics and the Sciences.

He continues to write predominantly for the Internet, making all works available in download format, with an added focus on the rapidly developing area of electronic books. His most extensive works are complete translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.