

# An English Translation and the Correct Interpretation of Laozi's Tao Te Ching

英譯並正解老子道德經

附 《道德經》艱深句子正解並白話對譯

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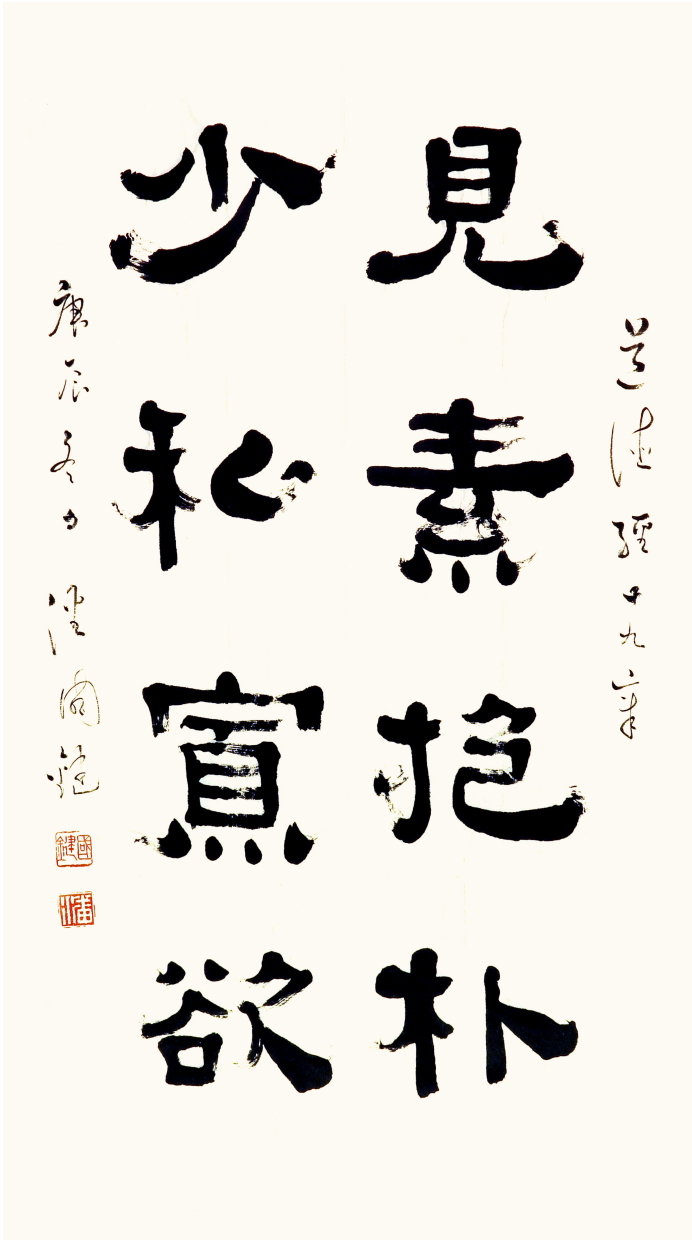
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In Loving Memory of Our Beloved

**Pui Luen Nora TSANG(曾佩鑾)**

Acknowledge one's pure inherent nature and  
embrace primitive simplicity - *Tao Te Ching*

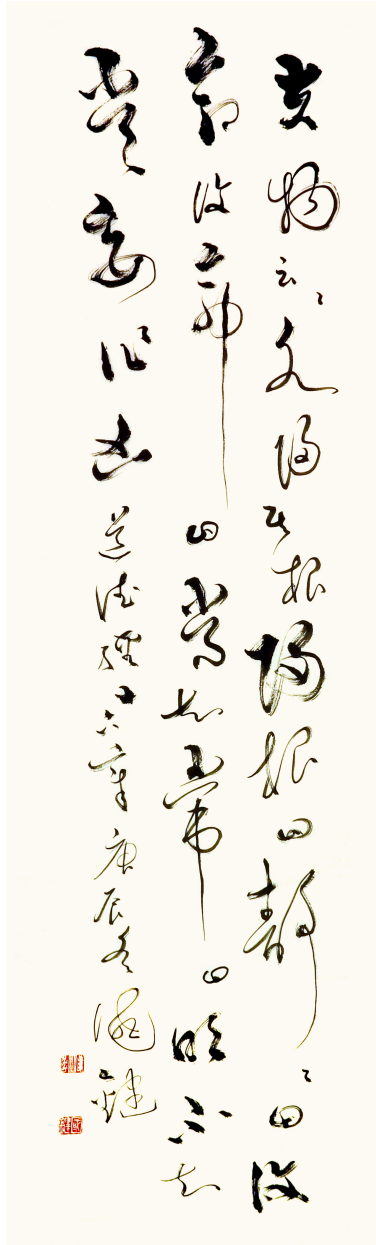


隸書 Clerical Script 68x35cm 2000AD  
Source: A Collection of Kwok Kin Poon's Calligraphy

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There are so many diverse things - Tao Te Ching



草書 Cursive Script 129x38cm 2000AD  
Source: A Collection of Kwok Kin Poon's Calligraphy

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is the most beneficial to act with no  
personal differentiation and intent - Tao Te Ching



篆書 Seal Script 67x31cm 2000AD  
Source: A Collection of Kwok Kin Poon's Calligraphy



## Introduction

### (I)

*Tao Te Ching* (《道德經》, or *Dao De Jing*), presumably written by Laozi (老子, who is also known as Lao Dan 老聃, Li Er 李耳, or Li Dan 李聃) of the 6th century BC, is one of the most famous and influential philosophical works in Chinese history. Being the foundational canon of Taoism (道家), *Tao Te Ching* outlines the characteristics and roles of the fundamental Tao (道) and its Te (德, Manifestation of Tao) in the formation and maintenance of all in the Universe. Written in fewer than 6000 Chinese characters, *Tao Te Ching* also depicts the underlying nature of governance<sup>(i)</sup> and some natural laws, which, remarkably, include modern scientific concepts such as atomic theory<sup>(ii)</sup>, chemical equilibrium<sup>(iii)</sup>, polarities<sup>(iv)</sup>, as well as the quantum uncertainty principle<sup>(v)</sup>. Accordingly, despite its age of over 2500 years, *Tao Te Ching* remains a monumental text that must be read by all.

### (II)

Unfortunately, *Tao Te Ching* is often misinterpreted by many for more than two thousand years. Their failures can largely be categorized into four types:

1. Misinterpreting through the lenses of Taoist Religion (道教) and Huang–Lao (黃老) concepts. One typical example is erroneously taking Laozi had advised one to completely rid all desires to become a celestial being (神仙), which often leads to misinterpreting “鬼” as “ghosts” and “神” as “gods” or “dieties” in *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>(vi)</sup> Laozi had only asked one to minimize desires and had never addressed the existence of supernatural entities. Heshang Gong (河上公), one of the most prominent masters of Taoist Religion and

- the earliest commentators of *Tao Te Ching*, had often committed this type of error.
2. Misinterpreting through the lenses of Confucianism. Thus, characters such as “仁”, “慈”, “善”, “德” are often misinterpreted by applying Confucian values.<sup>(vii)</sup> Laozi abhorred the establishment of Confucian “moral virtues”, and so he could not have cherished them in *Tao Te Ching*. As Confucianism is widespread among Chinese academia, this type of misinterpretation is frequently committed by many scholars, including the renowned Wang Bi (王弼), Kang Youwei (康有為), Zhang Mosheng (張默生), Gao Heng (高亨), and James Legge.
  3. Misinterpreting Chinese characters like “若”, “似”, and “或” as “seemingly”, “resemble”, and “perhaps”.<sup>(viii)</sup> Such misinterpretations often give rise to the incorrect impression that Laozi was advising one to be pretending, scheming, and calculating. Laozi had always cherished acting by one’s simple primitive nature and so would never have asked one to be pretending or disingenuous.
  4. Committing a combination of misinterpretations outlined in 1, 2, or 3. This type of error usually results in multiple self-contradictions and inconsistencies, which further generate confusions and mystifications in understanding *Tao Te Ching*.

(III)

As such, this book aims to provide readers with a clear, concise, consistent, and correct English translation and interpretation of *Tao Te Ching*<sup>(ix)</sup>, which is presented here in a line-by-line format accompanied by ample annotated footnotes. Footnotes include

justifications and references for interpreting key Chinese characters as well as brief discussions on various general misinterpretations. Further, to facilitate easy reading, the bare translated text is supplemented in a separate section, while the correct interpretation of difficult and complex sentences in vernacular Chinese (《道德經》艱深句子正解並白話對譯) in another.

It is my sincere hope that the world can finally understand the actual thought of Laozi, the wise sage of Taoism.

KS Vincent Poon

July 2020.

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(i) See Section One, Chapters 17 - 19, 29 - 31, 57 - 60, 65 - 67, 72 - 75, and 78-80.

(ii) See Section One, Chapter 21.

(iii) See Section One, Chapters 36, 40, and 77.

(iv) See Section One, Chapter 42.

(v) See Section One, Chapters 14 and 21.

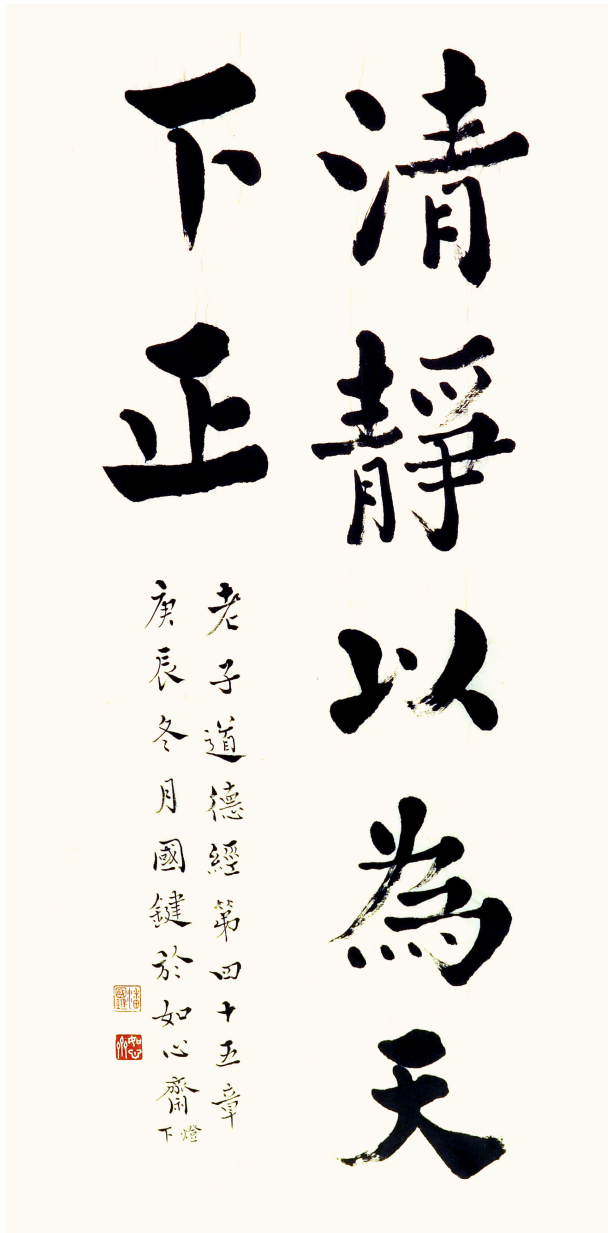
(vi) See Section One, Chapter 60, as well as footnotes 6 and 527 in Section Two. Laozi had always asked one to leave behind selfishness and be selfless. By contrast, Taoist religion contends one can follow certain practices to become a long-living celestial being (升仙/長生不老), a concept that is actually selfish and incompatible with Laozi's teachings.

(vii) See Section One, Chapter 8 Line 23, Chapter 49 Line 134, Chapter 54 Line 147, Chapter 59 Line 160, Chapter 63 Line 170, Chapter 67 Line 182, and Chapter 79 Line 213. See also the corresponding footnotes of these lines in Section Two.

(viii) See Section One, Chapter 5 Line 18, Chapter 15 Line 47, Chapter 78 Line 211, Chapter 4 Lines 10 and 11, Chapter 20 Line 62, Chapter 29 Line 87, and Chapter 61 Line 165. See also the corresponding footnotes of these lines in Section Two.

(ix) The current English interpretation is based on the original Chinese text of 81 chapters provided in *Laozi's Tao Te Ching with Wang Bi's Commentaries* (《老子王弼注》).

Pristine tranquillity - Tao Te Ching



楷書 Standard Script 69x31cm 2000AD  
Source: A Collection of Kwok Kin Poon's Calligraphy

**SECTION ONE**

**Translation and Interpretation**

# An English Translation and the Correct Interpretation of Laozi's Tao Te Ching

by KS Vincent POON (潘君尚) & Kwok Kin POON (潘國鍵)

## 第一章 Chapter 1

### 1. 道可道, 非常道; 名可名, 非常名。無名天地之始, 有名萬物之母。

The Tao (道, Tao, Path, or Way) that can be spoken or described is not the “Immutable and Everlasting Tao (常道)”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Name (名) that can be named or spelt out is not the “immutable and everlasting Name (常名)”. That which is “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)” is the Originator (始) of the Universe (天地)<sup>(2)</sup>, whereas that which is “identifiable and with names (有名)” (i.e. 德, Te, or Manifestation of Tao)<sup>(3)</sup> is the Mother of all things.<sup>(4)</sup>

### 2. 故常無, 欲以觀其妙; 常有, 欲以觀其微。

Therefore, the “immutable and everlasting Tao (常道)” and the “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)” can hopefully (欲) be used (以) to examine (觀) the unimaginable underlying wonders (妙) of Tao; whereas, the “immutable and everlasting Name (常名)” and the “identifiable and with names (有名)” can hopefully be used to examine (觀) the fundamental path that all things follow (微)<sup>(5)</sup> <sup>(6)</sup>.

### 3. 此兩者, 同出而異名, 同謂之玄。玄之又玄, 衆妙之門。

Both the “unidentifiable and nameless” and the “identifiable and with names” stem from the same source, but we merely labelled them differently. Similarly, both are regarded as great mysteries (玄)<sup>(7)</sup>. Mysteries upon mysteries, such are the doors and gates to all wonders (衆妙) of Tao and the Universe.

## **SECTION TWO**

### **Footnotes**

## Footnotes

(1) “常” here means “immutable and everlasting (恆/久)”. See *Kangxi Dictionary* (《康熙字典》).

“常”, the “immutable and everlasting”, can also refer to Tao (道) and its Manifestation (德) later on in the document. One example can be seen in Chapter 28 Lines 83 and 84.

(2) “天地” is literally “天 (Heaven and skies)” and “地 (Earth)”. Together, it refers to the entire Universe.

(3) “德” here is not “virtue” as cherished in Confucianism. For further elaborations, see footnote 4.

(4) Tao (道) can be thought of as the “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)” fundamental way that drives and begets all things in the Universe. Tao also manifests itself to become “identifiable and with names (有名)”, the custodian and Mother of all things. Wang Bi (王弼) provided an excellent elaboration on these circumstances:

“凡有皆始於無，故‘未形’、‘無名’之時，則為萬物之始，及其‘有形’、‘有名’之時，則長之育之，亭之毒之，為其母也。”

“Everything that exists originated from the unknown void that is indescribable (Tao). Hence, when Tao is ‘not yet having any form (未形)’ and ‘unidentifiable and nameless (無名)’, it plays the role of the Originator of all things. Afterwards, when it manifests to ‘take form (有形)’ and can be ‘identifiable and with names (有名)’, it rears all, nurses all, perfects all, matures all, and plays the role of Mother of all things.”

(interpreted by KS Vincent Poon)

Source: 王弼《老子王弼注》. 台北: 新興書局, 1964, p.003.



Laozi further elaborated on the relationship between “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)” and “identifiable and with names (有名)” in Chapter 40 Line 115:

“天下萬物生於有，有生於無。”

“All things under Heaven sprang from the entity that can be conceived and named, and the entity that can be conceived and named originates from the one that cannot be conceived nor named. ”

This “identifiable and with names (有名)”, the nurturer and Mother of all things, is referred later on as “Manifestation of Tao (德)” in Chapter 51 Line 139:

“道生之，德畜之。”

“Tao begets all things, the Manifestation of Tao nurtures all things.”

Hence, with very few exceptions throughout the document, “德” refers to Tao manifesting itself to become “identifiable and with names (有名)”.

The entire *Tao Te Ching* can, therefore, be called *The Book of the Fundamental Way of the Universe and its Manifestation (道德經)*.

For further elaborations on “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)”, please see Chapter 41 Line 117.

(5) “微” should be “the fundamental path that all follow (循)”, as in *Shuowen Jiezi* (《說文解字》). This is consistent with Wang Bi's (王弼) interpretation of “微” as “the fundamental path and eventuality of all conceivable things (歸終也)”.

“微”, however, cannot be interpreted as “the outer fringe (邊) of Tao”. Tao is natural, encompasses all, and homogenous (Chapter 25 Line 74). As such, Tao does not have any inner or outer compartments.

(6) “常無” refers to Line 1's “immutable and everlasting (常道)” and “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)”, while “常有” refers to Line 1's “the immutable and everlasting name (常名)” and “iden-

tifiable and with names (有名)”.

Line 2 is where Laozi addressed the limitation of his narratives on Tao - if Tao is indescribable, how then can Tao be discussed? Laozi asserted that he could only, at best, use what he called “unidentifiable and nameless (無名)” in the hopes (欲) of examining the indescribable Tao. Similarly, he could, at best, only use what he called “identifiable and with names (有名)” in the hopes of examining the infinitely small and unobservable elements of all identifiable and conceivable entities.

Many, such as Heshang Gong, incorrectly interpreted line 2’s “故常無欲以觀其妙” as:

“人常能無欲，則可以觀道之要。”

“Therefore, always possessing no desire shall allow one to examine the essential core of Tao.”

(interpreted by KS Vincent Poon)

Source: 《老子河上公注》，卷上，p.1.

Laozi had never asked anyone in *Tao Te Ching* to rid all desire completely:

- I. “Desires do arise during their natural propagations (化而欲作)” (Chapter 37 Line 106). Desire is obviously a natural product of Tao and accordingly should not be considered as a hindrance in the study of Tao.
- II. “If one plans to diminish an entity, one must first expand it...(將欲歛之，必固張之...)” (Chapter 36 Line 104). Laozi even discussed how one could apply Tao to achieve certain desirable effects.
- III. “Deride selfishness and minimize desires (少私寡欲)” (Chapter 19 Line 59). Laozi had never asked anyone to rid all desires completely, he only asked one to minimize selfish desires.
- IV. Wise sages (聖人) have at least this one desire: the desire to follow Tao. Hence, Laozi described them as people who wish to place themselves with Tao “居善地” (Chapter 8 Line 23) and desire no selfish desires “欲不欲” (Chapter 63 Line 175).

Completely ridding all desire may be consistent with some branches of Taoist religion (道教), but that is certainly not consistent with *Tao Te Ching*, the canon of Taoism (道家). This is probably why there are so many incorrect interpretations of “故常無欲以觀其妙; 常有欲以觀其徼” for nearly two thousand years, including that by the renowned Wang Bi (王弼).

The correct interpretation in vernacular Chinese of Line 2 should be:

“故此，姑且用這個‘常道’和‘無名’，希望能夠探索一下道的玄奧深妙；也姑且用這個‘常名’和‘有名’，希望能夠觀察一下德的萬物規迹。”

(interpreted by Kwok Kin Poon)

(7) “玄” was represented as “元” in the *Complete Library in Four Sections* (四庫全書) version of *Tao Te Ching*. “玄” was considered as a taboo character (避諱) in the *Complete Library in Four Sections*, for Qing Emperor Kangxi's given name was “玄燁”.

(8) As such, Tao (道), the fundamental way of the Universe, does not discern with the human concept of “beautiful” or “ugly”, “good” or “bad”.

(9) “Wise sage (聖人)” in Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* is a person who fully comprehends and earnestly follows Tao, which is very different than that of Confucian's.

(10) “Not acting with any personal differentiation and intent (無為)” does not mean one should not act at all. Laozi merely espoused one should act to follow Tao, the fundamental way of the Universe, instead of following one's personal differentiations and intents. Accordingly, one should act to follow the collective mindset of the people (Chapter 49 Line 134) as well as trust what the people trust and distrust what the people distrust (Chapter 49 Line 135).

To interpret “無為” as “one should not act at all” makes no

**SECTION THREE**  
**Translated Text Only**

# **Laozi's Tao Te Ching (老子道德經)**

## **Translated Text Only**

KS Vincent POON (潘君尚) & Kwok Kin POON (潘國鍵)

### **Chapter 1**

1. The Tao (The Tao, The Path, or The Way) that can be spoken or described is not the “Immutable and Everlasting Tao”. The Name that can be named or spelt out is not the “immutable and everlasting Name”. That which is “unidentifiable and nameless” is the Originator of the Universe, whereas that which is “identifiable and with names” is the Mother of all things.
2. Therefore, the “immutable and everlasting Tao” and the “unidentifiable and nameless” can hopefully be used to examine the unimaginable underlying wonders of Tao; whereas, the “immutable and everlasting Name” and the “identifiable and with names” can hopefully be used to examine the fundamental path that all things follow.
3. Both the “unidentifiable and nameless” and the “identifiable and with names” stem from the same source, but we merely labelled them differently. Similarly, both are regarded as great mysteries. Mysteries upon mysteries, such are the doors and gates to all wonders of Tao and the Universe.

### **Chapter 2**

4. All under Heaven recognize the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this, they have the idea of what ugliness is; they all recognize the goodness of the good, and in doing this, they have the idea of what not good is.

## **SECTION FOUR**

### **Correct Interpretation in Vernacular Chinese**

**《道德經》艱深句子正解並白話對譯**

## 《道德經》艱深句子正解並白話對譯 (註釋見英譯相關條目)

潘國鍵

### 第一章

#### 2. 故常無, 欲以觀其妙; 常有, 欲以觀其徼。

故此, 姑且用這個「常道」和「無名」, 希望能夠探索一下道的玄奧深妙; 也姑且用這個「常名」和「有名」, 希望能夠觀察一下德的萬物規迹。

### 第二章

#### 6. 生而不有, 為而不恃。

全無實質而獨自產生, 毫不依仗而獨自作為。

### 第四章

#### 11. 湛兮似或存!

(道)極其深厚啊! 它是常常存在的!

#### 12. 吾不知誰之子, 象帝之先。

我不知曉這道是誰所生的, 猜想在天出現前便已存在了吧。

### 第五章

#### 15. 多言數窮, 不如守中。

太多說話終會辭窮, 倒不如保持虛靜。

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Wear rags as coverings yet bear jades buried deep within - *Tao Te Ching*



隸書 Clerical Script 34x79cm 2019AD  
Source: A Collection of Kwok Kin Poon's Calligraphy

**SECTION FIVE**

**Tao Te Ching Scribed in Chinese Calligraphy**

**by KS Vincent Poon**

道可道非常道名可名非常名無名天地之始有名萬物之母故常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀其微此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄玄之又玄衆妙之門 天下皆知美之為美斯惡矣皆知善之為善斯不善矣故有無相生難易相成長短相形高下相傾音聲相和前後相隨是以聖人處無為之事行不言之教萬物作焉而不辭生而不有為而不恃功成而弗居夫唯弗居是以不去 不尚賢使民不爭不貴難得之貨使民不為盜不見可欲使民心不亂是以百姓之治虛其心實其腹弱其志強其骨常使民無知無欲使夫智者不敢為也為無為則無不治 道沖而用之或不盈淵兮似萬物之宗挫其銳解其紛和其光同其塵湛兮似或存吾不知誰之子象帝之先 天地不仁以萬物為芻狗聖人不仁以百姓為芻狗天地之間其猶橐籥乎虛而不屈動而愈出多言數窮不知守中 谷神不死是謂玄牝玄牝之門是謂天地根縣縣若存用之不勤 天地長久天地所以能長且久者以其不自生故能長生是以聖人後其身而身先外其身而身存非以其無私邪故能成其私 上善若水水善利萬物而不爭夫唯不爭故無尤處衆人之所惡故幾於道居善地心善淵與善仁言善信正善治事善能動善時 持而盈之不如其已揣而銳之不能長保全玉滿堂莫之能守富貴而驕自遺其咎功成名遂身

(1 of 12)

退天之道 載營魄抱一能無離乎專氣致柔能嬰兒乎滌除玄覽能無疵乎愛民治國能無知乎天門開闔能無雖乎明白四達能無為乎生之畜之生而不有為而不恃長而不宰是謂玄德 三十輻共一轂當其無有車之用埏埴以為器當其無有器之用鑿戶牖以為室當其無有室之用故有之以為利無之以為用 五色令人目盲五音令人耳聾五味令人口爽馳騁吹獵令人心發狂難得之貨令人行妨是以聖人為腹不為目故去彼取此 寵辱若驚貴大患若身何謂寵辱若驚寵為下得之若驚失之若驚是謂寵辱若驚何謂貴大患若身吾所以有大患者為吾有身及吾無身吾有何患故貴以身為天下若可寄天下愛以身為天下若可託天下 視之不見名曰夷聽之不聞名曰希得之不得名曰微此三者不可致詰故混而為一其上不皦其下不昧繩繩不可名復歸於無物是謂無狀之狀玄通深不可識夫唯不可識故強為之容 陳焉若冬涉川猶兮若畏四鄰儼兮若容渙兮若冰之將釋敦兮其若樸曠兮其若谷混兮其若濁孰能濁以靜之徐清孰能安以久動之徐生保此道者不欲盈夫唯不盈故能蔽不新成 致虛極守靜篤萬物並作吾以觀復夫物芸芸各復

(2 of 12)