

# THE WRITINGS OF LAO TZU

*The Tao Which Can Be Told*

In Nine Volumes

2 The Sky is Broad, the Earth Endures

Along with a New Commentary

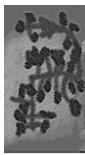
*In the Chinese tradition*

Richard Bertschinger

2010



[rberts@btinternet.com](mailto:rberts@btinternet.com) mytaoworld.com



TaoBooklets  
2010

seven / *shielding the light*

**T**HE SKY IS BROAD, THE EARTH ENDURES.

The reason why the sky and earth can endure  
Is that they never live for themselves.  
Therefore they can exist for ever.

Likewise the sage puts himself last  
But comes out in front.  
He has no regard for himself  
And thus is preserved.

Is it not because he has no self,  
That he can eventually be all self!

**T**he basic rule is that ‘selflessness endures’. The sky is broad and the earth endures because they may give birth without possessing (two / *the cultivation of the self*). They take the myriad things as so many straw dogs (five / *the usefulness of emptiness*) and claim no ownership over them. The myriad things depend on the sky and earth to be born but the sky and the earth never cling to them or

claim possession over them. Likewise the sage copies them and *puts himself last* - because he puts himself last, he can come out in front. This is the benefit of *shielding the light*.



The root principle of the Tao is of turning away from power over people, over the self, and over possessions - because loss is always lurking behind gain. Through *shielding the light*, the sage shines out more brightly than ever and endures.

The sky is broad and the earth endures because they live peacefully in themselves. They bestow without expecting anything back in return. This is entirely different from people who seek to profit from others or to make themselves rich. This is to rob for your own gratification.

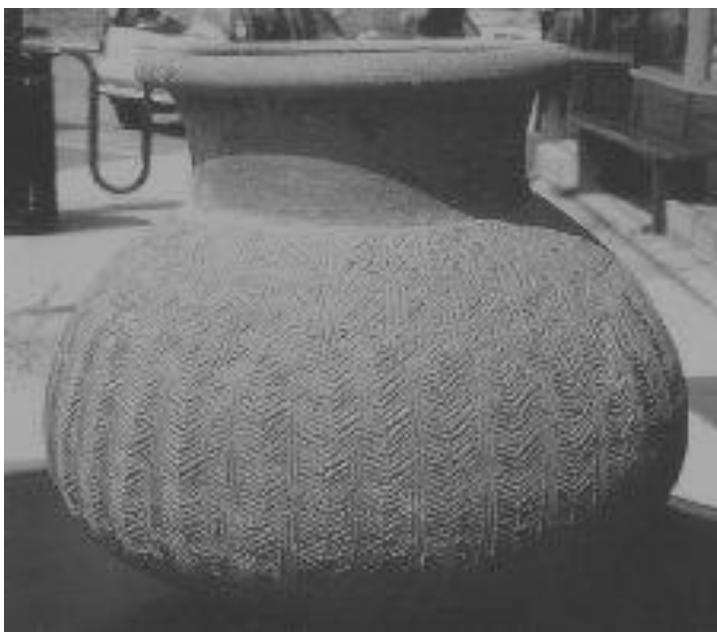
If you live for yourself, the world will fight you. If you never live for yourself, the world will return to you. It is

because the sky and the earth *never live for themselves* that they may live for ever - without ever reaching an end.

Likewise the sage puts himself last and places others before him. Yet the whole world admires him. He stands out because of his broad view. He has no regard for self and so is preserved. The people look up and regard him as their own father and mother. The shining stuff of life protects him - as a newborn child - and he is eternally preserved.

The sage *has no self*, yet he naturally favours himself. Having no self, he has no idea of self. But having no idea of self, his self is all there is!

NB. Following on the last chapter, the idea of the enduring is developed. In Taoist Yoga or nourishing life (*yangsheng*) we need to learn to turn away from power, over self...etc. The sky is broad, the earth endures - in such a manner, so does man.



eight / *adaptable in nature*

**T**HE VERY BEST IN PEOPLE IS LIKE WATER.

Water benefits all ten-thousand things  
And never fights them.  
It dwells in places the multitude despise,  
And thus comes close to the Way.

In living, stay close to the land.

In heart, go deep.

With people, remain natural.

In utterance, be truthful.

In government, simply be just.

In work, be able.

In action, be timely.

Thus never fighting

Never incur blame.

**T**he very best in human life is like water, adaptable in nature. Water benefits all the ten-thousand things and never fights them. It dwells in low and muddied places, *which the multitude despise*, and thus comes close

to the Way. Indeed by nature, water is practically identical to the Way.

We should adopt such a manner. In living, water *stays close to the land* and so should we. Water excels in benefiting the soil, so that plants and trees spring up - then immediately it flows on and downwards, like a female creature moving alongside the male, and so should we.

Water penetrates deeply



into caverns and hollows, and so should we *go deep* in our hearts. Yet even at a great depth, it remains constantly bright and clear. With people, water remains *natural*. Although it sustains life, it does so humbly and is never full of itself and nor should we be.

In utterance, water is *truthful* and we should be also. This is because when it receives an illuminated form, it reflects

back a true likeness. In government, it *is just* - for there is nothing it does not wash clean, purify or level, and this is how we should be also.

In its work, water *is able* - and can follow both curves and straight edges. It adjusts immediately to any shape, either the tortuous or straight. In summer it scatters; in winter it freezes. In its actions, it *is timely* and adapts to the season and we should also.

Blocked up, it halts; released it flows on. *Never fighting* it never *incurs blame*; water falls in with the ways of men without ever suffering blame. All respond to its governance and we should act so also. In the whole world there are none who can find fault with water.

nine / *practicing detachment*

**H**OLD A CUP AND FILL IT TO THE BRIM  
And it is not as good as stopping in time!  
Over sharpen the blade  
And it cannot be kept for long!

Gold and jewels may fill your home  
But they can never be safe.  
Riches and honours, along with pride,  
Will lead to your downfall.

The achievement complete, fame follows.  
But the body should pull back.  
This is the Way of Heaven.

**F**ill a cup *to the brim* and it will spill over. This is not as good as stopping in time. If you *over-sharpen the blade* it will soon be blunted. It comes to a keenness which breaks.

Gold and jewels may fill your home but they will never be kept safe. Too many possessions encumber the person. Riches and honours lead to your downfall. If you remain



proud and immoderate in behaviour, you are brought to task.

Once an achievement is complete, fame and praise will follow. This is just as night follows day. If you do not pull back you meet with harm. This is *practicing detachment*.

Even the sun at midday must move on. The full moon will surely wane just as pleasure turns to sadness at its height. All things enter a period of darkness after achievement. When water has filled a cup to the brim it flows over and onward. This illustrates the constant Way of nature and man.

NB. This chapter describes how to preserve an abundance – through practicing detachment.

ten / *what can you do?*

**G**UARDING THE FORT OF THE SPIRIT,  
And embracing the One,  
Can you not depart from it?

Concentrating the breath, and softening it,  
Can you become as a little child?  
Cleansing and repairing the Dark Vision,  
Can you make it without stain?  
Cherishing the people and ordering the country,  
Can you remain without being known?  
As the gates of Heaven open and close,  
Can you play the role of the female?  
As a brightness diffuses on all sides,  
Can you remain without being clever?

To give birth and nourish,  
To give birth but not to possess,  
To act but not to retain,  
To allow growth but not to command it,  
This may truly be called Hidden Virtue!

**T**he *fort of the spirit* represents your innermost being. Guard the innermost recesses of your self and you may be truly said to be alive. You should cherish and nurture the *fort of the spirit*. Pleasures, fierce emotions, and shocks deplete virtue. But when the soul is stilled, the mind is kept alive and set upon the Way, without difficulty. Thus we are able to live out our lives. This may truly be called Hidden Virtue!

If we can *embrace the One*, we never depart from our own person. We are preserved forever.



The One is born out of the Tao. Essentially a unified field, it comprises a single harmony. As the One enters our bodies, it creates mind; as it emerges abroad, it creates behaviour. It spreads afar, but essentially is just One.

Within the fort of the spirit lies the truth of each individual. If you can you rest at this abode, with one mind, all things of their own accord are your guests.

*Concentrate the breath* and make it no longer disjointed, and the whole person is open as a little child. With nothing particular in mind and intent on nothing special, the inner spirit will never leave you.

Wash out the heart and make it spotless - *cleansing and repairing the dark vision*. The heart lies hidden within the body but through its insights you can know any number of things. This is the *dark vision without stain*.

*Cherishing the people and ordering the country*, you disperse benefits so quietly the people never sense them. Indeed the best rulers were barely known by the people (*seventeen / genuine behaviour*).

The *gates of Heaven* are the year's junctures - spring, summer, autumn and winter. As the junctures open and close, so the seasons progress. The gates of Heaven also

refer to the nostrils. Open they let the breath in; closed they let the breath out.

The female is progenitor among the creatures, but does not lead any action. Quiet as a mother bird sitting on her nest, she slowly adapts to harmony. Can you play the role of the female, and merge with your breath? Then all the world is your guest and you dwell in peace. *A brightness diffuses on all sides* - without any doubts remaining. But can you remain without being over-clever? No one can be clever about how the Way fills the world. If you remain unknowing, all things will be transformed.



Creatures are given birth, their source unblocked, nurtured and cared for. Without inhibiting them, the Tao gives birth to all. But it never takes them as its own. *It acts but never retains.* The Tao bestows life but never seeks recompense for its action. It allows growth *but not to command it. This may truly be called Hidden Virtue!* We can only hope the heart in man remembers this. If we do not block things at source, they will come into being spontaneously. So why claim the credit? If we do not inhibit things, they will succeed quite naturally. So why retain any idea of action?

All things become proficient of their own accord without the need for a commander. But to retain this virtue without a master, this is a mystery! Whenever one speaks of Hidden Virtue, it indicates virtue without a master. This arises from the depths.

NB. All commentators agree this is a meditation text, along with Chapter Six. The softening of the breath and the female principle of receptivity occur in both. This chapter is the first in the Book to mention the idea of the One. Hidden Virtue is mentioned again in fifth-five / *the nourishment of virtue* and sixty-five / *genuine virtue*.

## eleven / *the usefulness of what is not there*

**T**HIRTY SPOKES COME TOGETHER IN A SINGLE HUB,

But what is not there enables the carriage to be used.

Fashion clay to make a pot,

But what is not there enables the pot to be used.

Cut doors and windows to make room,

And what is not there enables the room to be used.

Thus we profit through what is there,

But usefulness lies in what is not there.

**T**he wheels of old carriages had thirty spokes, according to legend, modelled on the thirty days of the month. The separate spokes depend collectively upon the hub to turn them about an axle. In a similar manner it was



only the solitary ruler who could amass the multitude. But it was his empty humility, like the empty space within the hub, which could collectively employ their strength.

Both cases use the power *of what is not there*. It is the empty space within the hub which enables the wheel to turn on its axle and the carriage to proceed. And because a ruler puts aside his own desires and remains empty in his heart, he can receive the multitude and solidly unite them.

Clay is fashioned into a pot but it is the emptiness of the pot which enables it to receive things. Cut doors and windows to make a room and it is the empty space that makes them useful. Thus people can make their exits and entrances, and dwell in the building.

People profit *through what is there* but find usefulness *in what is not there*. A space may be filled by any of the myriad creatures which dwell in the world. Emptiness and non-being regulate form and being. This is the way of the Tao - emptiness. The material functions through non-being.

## *twelve / the limiting of desire*

**T**HE FIVE COLOURS BLIND THE EYES,  
The five sounds deafen the ears,  
The five tastes spoil the mouth.  
Riding and hunting make the people's hearts wild.  
Prizing rare things impedes one's progress.

Therefore the sage is guided by his belly, not by his eyes.  
He lets go all the rest and considers himself!

**T**his chapter concerns the controls and limits of a sensual life. It is the outer joys of life which entice us, colours, sounds, food and pleasures, which all consume the quiet of our bodies. Riding and hunting madden the mind while rare things impede our progress.

If we can develop a deep asceticism, we may turn aside from what we outwardly crave and reach our inner nature.

Therefore the sage *is guided by his belly* and does not lose touch with his inner feelings. He checks his emotions and

so can nurture an inner light. *He lets go all the rest and considers himself!* This is *the limiting of desire*.

NB. The Taoist scripture *Yin fu Ching* says ‘the seed lies in the eyes’. This chapter builds on the idea of *the fort of the spirit* of ten and also *the function of emptiness* of eleven. Both concern the inner landscape of the body. A meditative imperative is clear. The theme builds towards the grand Taoist prayer in sixteen.



## thirteen / *content to feel shame*

**B**OTH FAVOURS AND CRITICISM FRIGHTEN ME.  
I honour suffering as it gives me the idea of a body.

Why do we say ‘both favours and criticism frighten me’?  
Criticism means I feel inferior.  
If I think I may lose, I am frightened.  
This is why ‘both favours and criticism frighten me’.

Why do ‘I honour suffering as it gives the idea of a body’?  
I acknowledge suffering because I acknowledge my body.  
When there is no longer a body,  
How can there be any suffering?

Therefore he who honours the whole world as his body,  
May be entrusted with the whole world.  
And he who loves the whole world as his body,  
May be said to care for the whole world.

**H**onour the world *as your own body* and you may be  
entrusted with the world. Love the world *as your*

*own body* and you may be said to care for the world.

Why should we be content to feel shame and suffering? Because shame and suffering give a limit to the body; they are the substance of the body. Knowing the body we understand the self.

Both favours and criticism frighten me. When I am favoured I am feared of losing the favour; when I am criticised I am also fearful of loss. Suffering approaches the truth of what it means to have a body. If I am led astray by



favours or disregard, I find this reflected in my own human body. Thus this suffering confirms I have a body!

The Tao of Lao Tzu

is 'to know the male but to guard the female' (twenty-nine / ???), to embrace peaceful *wu-wei* and to treat favours and criticism equally. Unlike most people, the sage is content to feel shame - paying no heed to the trials of his body. Indeed he will honour suffering as it gives him the idea of a body.

NB. Again, as in the last chapter, the talk is of the feelings in our bodies. We are instructed to be *content to feel shame*, and to *honour suffering*. The ascetic approach is clear. There are textual problems in reading this chapter. Some of the commentary may have crept into the text, as in Chapter 5. I have attempted to steer a middle course between commentators.

*fourteen / the assisting power of darkness*

**W**ATCH! IT CANNOT BE SEEN, IT IS SO BLURRED.

Listen! It cannot be heard, it is so hushed.

Grasp! It cannot be held, it is so minute.

These three cannot be further identified  
Because they are all muddled in the One.

Its rising brings no light,

Its falling brings no darkness.

Being entirely continuous,

It cannot be given a name.

In the end there seems to be nothing there at all.

So this is called 'the shape of no shape',

The image of there being nothing there at all.

There in a flash and gone again!

Go up to it - you cannot discern its head,

Follow it back - you cannot touch its tail.

Hold fast to the Tao of the ancients  
In order to govern the present.  
This is to know the ancient of beginnings,  
Which provides a foundation for the Way.

**N**ow we return to the original mystery of the Tao, *a darkness within darkness* (the One). The Tao is mysterious. It possesses no shape, no sound, and no form and yet it is the ultimate principle of all life. This idea demonstrates *the assisting power of darkness*.



The ultimate principle of life, being unknowable, also represents the chaos of creation, *all muddled in the One*. As we watch for it, it lacks definition and there is nothing

we can identify. *It cannot be seen* - it is so blurred. As we listen for it, it has no sound or voice. *It cannot be heard* - it is so hushed. As we grasp for it, it has no substance or form and there is nothing to hold on to. *It cannot be held* - it is so minute.

The Way must be received in tranquillity and searched for in the spirit. It can not be found through inquiry. All sensory experience is muddled in the One.

Entirely continuous, the Way cannot be given a name. It changes constantly, yet is unchanging, and will never end. It has no identifiable quality. It represents 'the shape of no shape' - and yet is able to fashion all the myriad creatures and thus create a shape for itself. Yet it is *as if there was nothing there at all*. Its very being is dependent upon non-being, and seems in question.

There in a flash, it is gone again! Suddenly it is there but then gone again! Now formed, now broken up, it cannot be glimpsed clearly. The One cannot be identified: put aside your feelings and it returns to you. *Go up to it*. You will never find its head. *Follow it back*. You will never touch its tail.

The sages held fast to the Tao of the ancients in order to govern the present. Thus the Tao was able to give birth to

the One. Thus they were able to govern all things. If you also would govern the world, *hold fast to the One*. It is the ancient of beginnings and the corner-stone to the Way.

Past and present differ, and customs alter, yet all derive from the One. Thus is it possible to hold fast to the Tao of the ancients and yet govern the present.

NB. This chapter is a natural forward to the discussion of the masters of old and *their manifestation of virtue* in the next chapter. It continues the theme of confounding sensation identified in the previous two chapters.

## fifteen / *a manifestation of virtue*

O F OLD, THE BEST MASTERS OF THE PATH  
Were subtle in their ways,

And hid their understanding.

They were so profound they were not easily recognized.  
And because they could not be easily recognized,  
All we can do is describe their appearance.

Wary as when fording streams in winter,  
Alert as if fearing attack from any side,  
Courteous as visiting guests,  
Yielding like ice about to melt,  
Genuine as an uncarved block of wood,  
Broad in view as a valley,  
Unrefined like muddied water.

Who can wait quiet and still  
While the mud gradually clears?  
Who can be settled long enough,  
Until gradually they come to life?

Those who kept to the Path  
Never desired fullness;  
And so never desiring fullness,  
Could be worn out and made anew.

This chapter describes the people of old and their Path of natural virtue. The people of old were masters of simplicity. They followed the Tao of acceptance and blended with the situation. They did not brilliantly shine forth and were not easily recognized, but their full *manifestation of virtue* created a light which could not be put out. Desiring neither fame nor fullness, they could be worn out and yet made anew. This is a manifestation of both *wu-we/i* and virtue.

The sages were *wary* as when fording streams in winter, and *alert* as if fearing attack from any side. They were *courteous* as visiting guests and *yielding* like ice about to melt. If we are courteous in manner, we may remain *quiet and still* until the mud settles and our minds clear. Staying *genuine* as an uncarved block of wood, *broad in view* as a valley, and *unrefined* like muddied water we retain a

feeling for the springs of life and gradually may be made anew.

Quietness enables the body to infuse with energy. So ultimately we hold to fullness, protecting our prosperity within. This is the essential skill gained on Lao Tzu's path.

When thoughts are accepting, they may be unchecked but hidden, and we become one with Heaven. We act warily, wondering whether or not to proceed.



*Simply put aside passion* and cast off desire and day by day you become emptier and emptier. You never desire fullness. Unrefined, perhaps unclear, you reserve the ultimate truth. Are you muddled? You do not show it. Merge and become one with the Yang energy of Heaven. Then blended with people of this world, you will never think of yourself as better than anyone else.

In this manner the Way is

followed closely, in thoroughness and caution.

NB. This chapter describes the people of old and the path of natural virtue. The title *a manifestation of virtue* is the first mention of 'virtue' (*te*) in the *Tao-te Ching*. The chapter is intensely interested in the possibility of us embodying the virtues of the old masters. It seeks to establish a direct transmission. The second half of the book especially develops this theme. This verse coins the term 'uncarved block' – an object of untouched simplicity. It also introduces the Taoist prayer in the next chapter sixteen / *returning to the root*.

sixteen / *returning to the root*

OBTAINING UTTER EMPTINESS,  
I guard this profound peace.  
All the ten-thousand things are created  
While I watch their rise and fall...

All things flourish,  
Each one returning to its root.  
Returning to the root they are at peace.  
This means they return to life.  
Returning to life they are eternal.  
Knowing the eternal they are shining.  
Not knowing the eternal is to blunder into disaster,  
Knowing the eternal, I find forbearance,  
With forbearance, I am openhearted,

Being openhearted, I act royally,  
Acting royally, I communicate with Heaven,  
Communicating with Heaven, I am one with the Tao.  
One with the Tao, my life is everlasting.

**I**f we obtain emptiness, we protect a sense of peace. The one who attains the Tao may *put aside passion* and cast off desire, attaining a state of chasteness within. Obtaining this profound condition we may protect our inner singularity and thus the peace.

This demonstrates an emptiness grounded on all things. In such a state we protect our peace and correctness. We watch things rise and fall, and *flourish*, also in peace and correctness. Eventually they are *returning to the root* - and we should respect and think hard on this root. All beings rise out of non-being; and all activity out of *wu-wei*.



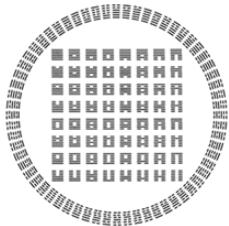
For being quiet means a *return to life*. Quiet brings the spirit to life - a spirit *eternal* which is our destiny and shines out. This spirit is neither partial nor prominent. It is ultimately neither bright nor dark; it feels neither heat nor cold. Unchanging it reaches out to all people and things, neglecting none. But allow yourself to drift from one thing to another and you are caught up in action, there is duplicity of thought, as all objects separate from their ties and their fate. This is to lapse in the eternal and to blunder into disaster.

If I can understand the eternal Tao and *put aside passion* and cast off desire, there is nothing I cannot accept or *forbear*. I am unselfish and open-hearted and the falsities of life find no way in. My self is One, my mind illuminating a thousand, ten-thousand differences, all reducing back to just one, one thing - me, myself, now, here, at this moment. This is the criterion of Taoist ecstasy, a *royal certainty* which admits of little or no outward expression.

Merging with the shining stuff of life, I merge with Heaven. As virtue and Heaven communicate, I am one with the Tao, touching upon utter emptiness and non-being. I approach the borders of life everlasting - which signifies a body which may die, but never perish. I am one at the

boundary of self and non-self, freed from all danger, away from harm, living totally with Tao, beyond trouble or pain.

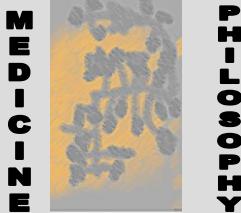
NB. This beautiful verse with its lapidary style brings to a close the opening chapters of the *Tao-te Ching*. The stations of the Way have been described. The scope of the chapter moves from the ‘small me’, humble and empty, to the ‘big me’, large as life and one with Heaven and earth. This is *returning to the root*. To *put aside passion and cast off desire* sums up the message of the previous few chapters. This Taoist prayer is an assertion of faith in eternal life.



The Writings of Lao Tzu in Nine Volumes

2. The Sky is Broad, the Earth Endures

# Tao Booklets



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Day by day, the chunzi self-strengthens accordingly