

Preface

What Is This Book About?

Tao Te Ching was written around 600 BCE by an ancient Chinese sage, *Lao Tzu*, an enigmatic figure whose existence is still debated. It consists of two books: *Tao* (the Way 道) and *Te* (Virtue 德). Contrary to what some may believe to be a book on morality (as “*Tao Te*” suggested in its common Chinese usage), it describes the Tao, the formless and fathomless ground from which all things arise and to which all things return, the natural yet mysterious order that governs everything. Virtue (*Te*) is the manifestation or function of the Tao that is above and beyond ordinary virtues, moral codes, and social conventions. This profound text points to a way of being that is simple, natural, and effortless (acting non-action, or *wei wu wei* 為無為) when one lives in harmony with the Tao.

This ancient text has inspired numerous translations; it is one of the most translated texts worldwide, exceeded only by the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita. In translating this text, I am truly standing on the shoulders of giants, as I have benefitted tremendously from many predecessors. Although it is not meant to be a scholarly work, I have consulted more than a dozen translations and renditions; in particular, the excellent work of Ursula K. Le Guin, Rosemarie Anderson, Paul J. Lin, and Red Pine has been most helpful. The commentaries compiled by Red Pine were especially valuable, for they incorporate the thoughts of some of the greatest Chinese scholars and thinkers in the past two millennia, including Wang Pi (王弼), Su Chè (蘇轍), Ho Shang Kung (河上公), and Han Shan

Te-Ch'ing (憨山德清), to name a few. Studying Thomas Merton's "The Way of Chuang Tzu," a rendition of another Chinese classic by Chuang Tzu (莊子), has also helped deepen my understanding of the teachings of the Tao.

The Tao has been likened to the moon, the feminine, a mysterious womb. It is a fertile valley that gives rise to, provides for, and accomplishes all things without expectation or possession. In working on this classic, I hope to contribute a uniquely feminine voice. As far as I know, almost all previous attempts were made by male translators, except the ones by Ursula K. Le Guin and Rosemarie Anderson, my personal favourites. Another distinctive feature of this book is the pithy personal reflection I wrote for each verse, which serves two purposes. One is to preserve its authenticity, as some previous translators had taken the liberty to insert their own views into the text. Though insightful and illuminating, they may not reflect Lao Tzu's original intent. More importantly, I hope to humanize these ancient teachings, which point to the harmonization and integration of the feminine and masculine that is ever more relevant in the contemporary world.

Although I endeavoured to capture the text's original meaning, it is a tall order because of its cryptic and often paradoxical nature, as well as the difficulty inherent in Chinese syntax. These problems are compounded by the fact that the same Chinese character can connote various meanings and that there were no punctuation marks in ancient Chinese writings. Despite these challenges, I attempted to retain not only the text's original meaning but also its poetic rhyme and rhythm, which was not preserved in some earlier translations. To avoid using commentaries or footnotes in particularly obscure verses, I gave a more liberal rendition to create a better flow so readers could follow more easily. I also carefully curated and paired each verse with visual imagery to evoke a sense of tranquillity that I hope the readers will enjoy. I am most grateful to Roshi Joan Halifax for encouraging me to pursue this project. My utmost gratitude

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Why Did I Write This Book?

I grew up in Hong Kong and have lived in North America for over three decades. I have spent most of my adult life pursuing western medicine and modern science. Translating this ancient philosophical and spiritual classic seems to be the best way to reconnect with my Chinese roots and rekindle my artistic inclination. Another reason is that the teachings of the Tao have an intimate and profound influence on the development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in China. I wanted to deepen my own contemplative practice through this work. Perhaps the most important reason, in retrospect, is that there is something amiss in my previous book, “The Art and Science of Compassion. A Primer.” In it, I discussed how compassion is innate and also how it is a trainable skill, and suggested a few ways by which one can live a compassionate and flourishing life. However, I feel it is incomplete, for there is a way of being beyond intellectual understanding, which can only be accessed through intuitive knowing, loving presence, and pure beingness that is full of vitality. I wanted to dive deeply into what ancient wisdom has to offer with regard to this mode of being. I discovered that, without effort, lovingkindness, compassion, peace, and tranquillity could flow naturally and spontaneously into one’s life when one is harmonized with the Tao. As I completed this work, I realized how little did I anticipate that I would be simultaneously transformed in the process and become more open to the magic of our existence that awaits us. I hope on reading this book, you would too.

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