Introduction

Few works have been translated and commented upon as often as the *Dàodéjīng* (道德經), attributed to the enigmatic figure Lǎozǐ (老子).[1] Yet for all its familiarity, this brief text remains strangely elusive. Its language is spare and elliptical, speaking more in images than in explanations: water settling, valleys receiving, the uncarved block, the usefulness of emptiness. It gestures toward the Dào (道), the formless, fathomless ground from which all things arise and to which all things return, and toward dé (德), often rendered as virtue, though here better understood not as moral rectitude but as a quiet inner potency, the subtle efficacy through which the Dào becomes tangible in ordinary life.[2]

Rather than prescribing ethical rules to follow, the *Daodejing* points toward a way of being that is natural, effortless, and simple—one aligned with what already moves beneath us, like breath finding its rhythm or water finding its level. Yet it does not speak in a single register. Its voice may be cosmological, practical and personal, or political, addressing questions of leadership, order, restraint, and the use of force. These dimensions, moreover, are not neatly separated. A passage that appears to address the governance of a state may also illuminate the governance of the self; a saying about armies may be read as a meditation on aggression, conflict, and the cost of coercion. For modern readers, the passages addressed to rulers may at first feel the most distant. Yet they belong to the text's wider concern with how power is exercised, how disorder arises, and how life may be guided without domination.

When I first encountered the text, I had no intention of turning it into a book project. I simply wanted to learn from it. Reading the classical Chinese was slow and demanding; each line seemed to open into multiple meanings at once. I turned to English translations for help. Some preserved literal accuracy but lost the music and cadence that give the original its poetic life. Others embraced lyrical freedom

but drifted too far from the text's depth and precision. Still others blended interpretation so thoroughly into translation that the ancient voice grew faint behind modern commentary.[3]

I began to wonder whether it might be possible to hold both fidelity and poetry together, to translate in a way that remained faithful to meaning without sacrificing the text's spare, resonant beauty.

This question led me into a deeper study. I consulted classical dictionaries and glossaries, traced the etymologies of key terms, read ancient commentaries alongside modern scholarship, and followed current debates informed by historical, textual, and linguistic analysis. These investigations ground the translations that follow.

Yet scholarship alone did not answer what became, for me, the deeper question.

As I worked closely with Laozi's verses, another concern gradually surfaced. The *Daodejing* describes the qualities of a life aligned with the Dao: zìrán (自然, "self-so" or spontaneity), wúwéi (無爲, non-forcing action), clarity, softness, ease. But it often presents these as the *fruits* of alignment rather than as explicit methods. It shows what such a life looks like, but not always how one cultivates the inner conditions that make it possible.

I found myself asking: How does one actually practise this? How does one learn to embody spontaneity rather than merely contemplate it? Does it simply mean being carefree, or does it require its own kind of discipline and attentiveness? How does non-forcing action become lived experience rather than philosophy?

While pursuing these questions, I encountered the *Nèiyè* (內業), a chapter in the *Guǎnzǐ* (管子), known here as *Inner Training,*[4] a text far less familiar to most readers than the *Daodejing*. Often considered one of the earliest Daoist texts on cultivation, it reads like a quiet companion to the *Daodejing*. Where the *Daodejing* speaks in paradox and image, the *Nèiyè* speaks more directly about practice: stillness, breath, the settling of the mind, the guarding and nourishing of vitality. It describes transformation as careful attunement, a process that gathers and clarifies as agitation subsides.

I read this attention to inner training alongside the *Daodejing*'s images of alignment, allowing the more explicit guidance of the *Neiye* to illuminate a practice that the *Daodejing* often leaves implicit.

Reading it, I felt as though a missing piece had quietly fallen into place. The *Neiye* gave sustained attention to questions of cultivation that I had encountered more briefly in the *Daodejing*. I read them here as companions, each illuminating aspects of the other while retaining its own concerns. This way of reading shaped the book; it is not a claim that one text was composed to explain or complete the other.

For this reason, the book is divided into two parts: Part One presents the *Daodejing*, and Part Two presents the *Neiye*. Both texts are approached slowly and in the same spirit. In Part One, rather than following the received chapter sequence throughout, I have grouped the *Daodejing*'s verses into thematic sections, each introduced by a brief essay to orient the reader to the ideas that follow. These groupings are meant as guides rather than rigid categories, since the verses rarely belong to a single theme and often speak across several themes at once. Some verses name the organizing theme directly; others illuminate it through a related image, a contrast, or a practical consequence. This arrangement[5] does not seek to replace the traditional order, but to offer another path of approach, allowing related images, themes, and movements of thought to illuminate one another across chapter boundaries. Part Two, by contrast, preserves the *Neiye* in sequence, so that its inward unfolding may remain visible.

Verse 1 of the *Daodejing* serves as an opening key, a guided close reading that establishes key terms; after that, the verses in both parts follow a steady rhythm: first, a close translation grounded in early usage and historical context; next, a brief reflection that draws out the verse's central insight in my own words and invites the reader to linger with it; and finally, a poem or haiku offered as contemplative commentary.

These poems and haiku are lyrical responses shaped by deep listening to each verse. They also belong, in their own way, within a broader Chinese literary and contemplative tradition in which root text, reflection, and verse are not sharply separated. Later Daoist interpreters at times used verse to expound the *Daodejing* itself, allowing poetic language to serve as another mode of insight.[6] These contemplative responses arise from my own life, with its joys and losses, uncertainties and small awakenings, and from my experience as a mother, a wife and now a widow, a teacher, a Zen Buddhist chaplain and practitioner, and a lifelong seeker. They are meant to humanize the text, allowing its ancient wisdom to breathe within the texture of ordinary modern life.

Alongside these verbal responses, the book also includes quiet images—landscapes, living forms, and spare motifs—that echo the text's imagery and create a space for contemplative pause.

To support readers who wish to go deeper, the book includes extensive supplementary materials, with detailed notes and bibliographies. These notes explain nuances in translation, highlight controversies, provide background on early Chinese philosophy, and offer references for further study. Appendices 1 and 2 discuss the formation and historical settings of the two texts, and may be read before Parts One and Two. Appendix 3 may be read after both texts; it considers the relations between Daoist philosophy and religion. Appendix 4 places Daoism in conversation with Chan and Sōtō Zen. My hope is that the main text remains clear and approachable for general readers, while these materials quietly hold the scholarly detail for readers who want to trace the complexities in greater depth.

My reasons for writing this book are also personal. I grew up in Hong Kong and have lived in North America for most of my adult life, immersed in Western medicine and modern science. Translating these texts became a way to reconnect with my Chinese roots and rediscover my artistic voice. It also deepened my contemplative practice, since Daoist thought was among the important Chinese

intellectual and contemplative traditions that shaped the development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism.

In retrospect, this project completes something left unfinished in my earlier work on compassion. I had written about compassion as a practice, the intention to alleviate suffering, yet sensed that something lay beyond intention: a deeper register of presence, a way of being grounded in intuitive knowing.

I now realize that when one returns to spontaneity and non-forcing action, care no longer needs to arise from moral effort. It becomes a form of attunement: meeting life as it is, helping where help is needed, and stepping back where interference would harm. The *Daodejing* points toward this harmony with remarkable clarity. And through the *Neiye*, I began to glimpse how the inner conditions for such a life might be gently fostered, through clearing, tending, and allowing.

What began as research slowly became practice.

What began as translation became listening.

This book is offered in that spirit, as a companion and an invitation to a way of being rather than a philosophical treatise. These pages may yield most when met slowly, one passage at a time, one sitting, one day. Both the *Daodejing* and the *Neiye* speak as much by return as by progression, circling their central insights through recurring images, themes, and inflections. What seems at first like repetition may, with patient dwelling, disclose a finer difference in tone, emphasis, or perspective. To return is therefore not to read the same thing again, but to let it deepen. Read in that spirit, these pages may become a kind of refuge to which one returns over time.

If they help you pause and sense a steadier current beneath the surface of daily life, then these ancient texts have already done their work.

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