

THE GNL
TAO TE CHING



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GNL's Not Lao

Version 4.1

Caveat

The Tao Te Ching, "the book of flow and harmony", is the fundamental text of Taoism. Its origins lost in the revolutions of Chinese history, it is known to pre-date the invention of paper. In fact its form exhibits many of the features of an oral tradition, suggesting it may pre-date writing as well. The unknown author of the Tao Te Ching is popularly known as Lao Tse, which is both "the old philosopher" and "the old philosophy". Hence Lao Tse is also a title for the book.

Many myths, religions, cults, yogas, and martial disciplines have sprung up around Lao Tse. The poem's parallels with the Bhagavad Gita, its implicit opposition to Confucian thought, its relationship with Chuang Tse and Sun Tse, and its distinction from the discipline of Zen are subjects of some controversy. As a thread connecting human endeavors over thousands of years, there appears no proper historical context for interpretation of the work.

Moreover, ancient Chinese will not properly translate into modern Chinese as the meanings of its thousands of pictograms have evolved, undocumented, over millenia. Translation into English presents further problems as English and Chinese involve very different maps of human understanding. Likewise, its sheer antiquity has burdened the work with plentiful copying errors, editorial remarks, revisions and misunderstandings. Worst of all, most folk that quote Lao Tse are selling something.

The GNL attempts to distill several popular English translations of Lao Tse into a consistent and accessible poem. It is based on the works of Robert G. Henricks, Lin Yutang, D.C. Lau, Ch'u Ta-Kao, Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English, Richard Wilhelm, Victor H. Mair, Kenneth M. Happel, and Aleister Crowley. It is important to keep in mind that the GNL is not translation, but interpolation. In this it reduces several long-standing paradoxes and riddles from the text. Puzzling these old mysteries may be more rewarding than accepting a single gloss on them. So the GNL is best regarded as a starting point; if you enjoy this work, you'll be well served in examining the documents it draws upon.

Structural Changes

- The last three lines of chapter 28 have moved to the end of Chapter 27.
- The last three lines of chapter 39 have moved to the end of Chapter 26.
- The last three lines of chapter 47 oppose most translations.
- The first three lines of chapter 54 have moved to the start of Chapter 38.
- The last two lines of chapter 55, a repetition of the last two lines of chapter 30, have been removed.
- The first line of chapter 60 has moved to the start of chapter 59.
- Chapter 64 is split in two.
- In chapter 64a, the order of the second and third paragraphs is reversed.
- The last four lines of Chapter 67 have moved to the start of Chapter 68.

Part 1

1. Flow

Flow courses within the world
Like poetry within a text,
Reflecting the distinctions
That shape reality.

Unconsciously, distinctions are sensed;
Consciously, distinctions are anticipated,
Sensation blending with anticipation
To form a continuous surface.

Beneath this surface lays mystery,
Flowing ever deeper and more subtle.

2. Distinction

When beauty is discovered
Then ugliness emerges;
When good is discovered
Then evil emerges.

So alive and dead are distinguished from nature,
Difficult and easy from progress,
Long and short from contrast,
High and low from depth,
Song and speech from melody,
After and before from sequence.

The gentle assume no distinction,
Undertake no action,
But accept the rise and ebb of things.
They nurture, but do not own,
And live, but do not dwell.

3. Inaction

Not praising the worthy prevents rivalry,
Not esteeming the valuable prevents theft,
Not displaying the beautiful prevents desire.

So the gentle govern people:
Emptying their minds,
Filling their bellies,
Weakening their ambitions,
And strengthening their bones.

If people lack knowledge and desire
Then they can not act;
If no action is taken
Harmony remains.

4. Limitless

Flow fills a limitless vessel:
Embraced by the senses, it is not contained by the world;
It cannot be cut, knotted, dimmed or stilled;
Its depths are hidden, ubiquitous and eternal;
I don't know where it comes from;
It comes before nature.

5. Nature

Nature is not kind;
It treats all things impartially.
The gentle are not kind,
And treat all people impartially.

Nature is like a bellows,
Empty, yet never ceasing its supply.
The more it moves, the more it yields;
So the gentle draw on experience
And cannot be exhausted.

6. River

Experience is a riverbed,
Its source hidden, forever rising;
Its entrance, the root of the world,
Flow courses within it:
Draw upon it; it will not run dry.

7. Endurance

Nature endures because it does not contend.

The gentle fall behind, but find themselves ahead,
Ignore their ambition, but find themselves content.

They endure because they do not contend.

8. Water

The best of humanity is like water,
Which benefits all things
And does not contend against them,
Which runs in places others disdain,
Abiding within flow.

So the gentle:
Live within nature,
Think within the deep,
Give within impartiality,
Speak within trust,
Govern within order,
Craft within ability,
Act within opportunity.

They do not contend, and none contend against them.

9. Retire

Fill a cup to its brim and it is easily spilled;
Temper a sword to its hardest and it is easily broken;
Amass the greatest treasure and it is easily stolen;
Claim credit and honor and you easily fall;
Retire once your purpose is achieved - this is natural.

10. Harmony

Embracing flow, you become embraced;
Breathing gently, you become newborn;
Clearing your mind, you become pure;
Nurturing your children, you become impartial;
Opening your heart, you become accepted;
Accepting the world, you embrace flow.

Bearing and nurturing,
Creating but not owning,
Giving without demanding,
This is harmony.

11. Contenance

Thirty spokes meet at a nave;
Because of the hole we may use the wheel.
Clay is moulded into a vessel;
Because of the hollow we may use the cup.
Walls are built around a hearth;
Because of the doors we may use the house.
Thus distinctions seem to contain,
But their use is to transform.

12. Substance

Too much color blinds the eye,
Too much music deafens the ear,
Too much taste dulls the palate,
Too much talk confuses the mind,
Too much desire tears the heart.

In this way the gentle care for people:
They provide for the belly, not for the senses;
They ignore appearance and hold fast to substance.

13. Self

Both praise and blame cause concern,
For they bring people hope and fear.
The object of hope and fear is the self;
Without self, to whom may fortune and disaster occur?

Therefore,
Distinguish self from world and you may be given the world,
But identify self with world and you may accept the world.

14. Flow

Looked at but cannot be seen - it is beneath form;
Listened to but cannot be heard - it is beneath sound;
Held but cannot be touched - it is beneath feeling;
These depthless things evade sensation,
And blend into a single mystery.

In its rising there is no light,
In its falling there is no darkness,
A continuous thread beyond distinction,
Lining what can not occur;
Its form formless,
Its image nothing,
Its name silence;
Follow it, it has no back,

Meet it, it has no face.

Attend the present to deal with the past;
Thus you grasp continuity,
The essence of flow.

15. Muddy Water

The gentle possess understanding
So profound they can not be distinguished.
Because they cannot be distinguished
I can only describe their appearance:

Cautious as one crossing thin ice,
Undecided as one surrounded by danger,
Modest as one who is a guest,
Unbounded as melting ice,
Genuine as unshaped wood,
Broad as a valley,
Seamless as muddy water.

Who stills the water that the mud may settle,
Who seeks to stop that he may travel on,
Who desires less than may transpire,
Decays, but will not renew.

16. Decay and Renewal

Empty the self completely;
Embrace perfect peace.
The world will rise and move;
Watch it return to rest.
All the flourishing things
Will return to their source.

This return is peaceful;
It is the tide of nature,
An eternal decay and renewal.
Accepting this brings contentment,

Ignoring it brings misery.

Who accepts nature's tide becomes all-cherishing;
Being all-cherishing he becomes impartial;
Being impartial he becomes magnanimous;
Being magnanimous he becomes natural;
Being natural he becomes one with flow;
Being one with flow he becomes immortal:
Though his body will decay, flow will not.

17. Rulers

The best rulers are scarcely known by their subjects;
The next best are loved and praised;
The next are feared;
The next despised:
They have no faith in their people,
And their people become unfaithful to them.

When the best rulers achieve their purpose
Their subjects claim the achievement as their own.

18. Hypocrisy

When flow is forgotten
Duty and justice appear;
Then knowledge and wisdom are born
Along with hypocrisy.

When harmonious relationships dissolve
Then respect and devotion appear;
When a nation falls to chaos
Then loyalty and patriotism are born.

19. Simplify

If we could abolish knowledge and wisdom
Then people would profit a hundredfold;
If we could abolish duty and justice
Then harmonious relationships would form;
If we could abolish artifice and profit
Then waste and theft would disappear.

Yet such remedies treat only symptoms
And so they are inadequate.

People need personal remedies:
Reveal your naked heart and embrace your original nature;
Bind your self-interest and control your ambition;
Forget your habits and simplify your affairs.

20. Wandering

What is the difference between assent and denial?
What is the difference between beautiful and ugly?
What is the difference between fearsome and afraid?

The people are merry as if at a magnificent party
Or playing in the park at springtime,
But I am tranquil and wandering,
Like a newborn before it learns to smile,
Alone, with no true home.

The people have enough and to spare,
Where I have nothing,
And my heart is foolish,
Muddled and cloudy.

The people are bright and certain,
Where I am dim and confused;
The people are clever and wise,
Where I am dull and ignorant;
Aimless as a wave drifting over the sea,
Attached to nothing.

The people are busy with purpose,
Where I am impractical and rough;
I do not share the peoples' cares

But I am fed at nature's breast.

21. Accept

Harmony is in accepting.

Flow is without form or quality,
But expresses all forms and qualities;
Flow is hidden and implicate,
But expresses all of nature;
Flow is unchanging,
But expresses all motion.

Beneath sensation and memory
Flow is the source of all the world.
How can I know the source of the world?
By accepting.

22. Home

Accept and you become whole,
Bend and you straighten,
Empty and you fill,
Decay and you renew,
Want and you acquire,
Fulfill and you become confused.

The gentle accept the world
As the world accepts flow.
They do not display themselves, so are recognized,
Do not justify themselves, so are respected,
Do not boast, so are credited,
Do not pride, so endure,
Do not contend, so none contend against them.

The ancients said, "Accept and you become whole";
Once whole, the world is as your home.

23. Words

Nature says only a few words:
High wind does not last long,
Nor does heavy rain.
If nature's words do not last
Why should those of man?

Who embraces flow becomes harmonious.
Who embraces loss becomes lost.
For who embraces flow is buoyed in flow,
But who embraces loss is lost in flow.

24. Indulgence

Straighten yourself and you will not stand steady;
Display yourself and you will not be clearly seen;
Justify yourself and you will not be respected;
Promote yourself and you will not be believed;
Pride yourself and you will not endure.

These behaviors are wasteful, indulgent,
And so they attract disfavor;
Harmony avoids them.

25. Limitless

There is a mystery,
Beneath distinction,
Silent, depthless,
Alone, unchanging,
Ubiquitous and liquid,
The mother of nature.
It has no name, but I call it "flow";
It has no limit, but I call it "limitless".

Being limitless, it expands away forever;

Expanding away forever, it returns to myself:

Flow is limitless,
So nature is limitless,
So the world is limitless,
And so I am limitless.

For I am distinguished from the world,
The world from nature,
Nature from flow,
And flow from what courses beneath distinction.

26. Calm

Gravity is the source of lightness,
Calm, the master of haste.

A traveller will journey all day, watching over his belongings;
Yet safe in his bed, he will lose them in sleep.

The captain of a great ship must not act lightly or hastily.
Acting lightly, he loses sight of the sea,
Acting hastily, he loses touch with the crew.
The great ship cannot be treated as a small boat.

The captain should not adorn it like a jade figurehead,
But steady it like a stone keel.

27. Detail

The perfect traveller leaves no trail to be followed;
The perfect speaker leaves no question to be answered;
The perfect accountant leaves no working to be completed;
The perfect container leaves no lock to be closed;
The perfect knot leaves no end to be unravelled.

So the gentle nurture all men
And abandon no one.
They accept everything

And reject nothing.
They attend to the smallest detail.

So the strong must guide the weak,
For the weak are raw material to the strong.
If the guide is not respected,
Or the material not cared for,
Confusion will result, no matter how clever one is.

This is the secret of perfection:
As when raw wood is carved, it becomes a tool,
So when a man is employed, he becomes an office;
The perfect carpenter leaves no wood to be carved.

28. Perfection

Using the male, being female,
Being the entrance of the world,
You embrace harmony
And become as a newborn.

Using strength, being weak,
Being the root of the world,
You complete harmony
And become as unshaped wood.

Using the light, being dark,
Being the world,
You perfect harmony
And return to flow.

29. Ambition

Those who wish to change the world
According with their desire
Cannot succeed.

The world is shaped by flow;
It cannot be shaped by the self.

Trying to change it, you damage it;
Trying to possess it, you lose it.

So some lead, while others follow.
Some are warm, others cold
Some are strong, others weak.
Some get where they are going
While others fall by the way.

So the gentle are neither wasteful nor violent.

30. Violence

Powerful men are well advised not to use violence,
For violence has a habit of returning;
Thorns and weeds grow wherever an army goes,
And lean years follow a great war.

A general is well advised
To achieve nothing more than his orders:
Not to take advantage of his victory.
Nor to glory, boast or pride himself;
To do what is dictated by necessity,
But not by choice.

For even the strongest force will weaken with time;
Then its violence will return, and kill it.

31. Armies

Armies are tools of violence;
They cause people to hate and fear.
The gentle will not join them.
The gentle purpose is creation;
An army's purpose is destruction.

Weapons are tools of violence,
Not of a gentle soul;
The gentle use weapons only when there is no choice,

And then calmly, and with tact,
Finding no beauty in them.

Whoever finds beauty in weapons
Delights in the slaughter of men;
And who delights in slaughter
Cannot content themselves with peace.

So slaughters should be mourned
And conquest celebrated with a funeral.

32. Shapes

Flow has no true shape,
And therefore none can control it.
If a ruler could control flow
All things would follow
In harmony with his desire,
And sweet rain would fall,
Effortlessly slaking every thirst.

Flow is shaped by use,
But then the shape is lost.
Do not hold fast to shapes
But let sensation course into the world
As a river runs down to the sea.

33. Virtues

Who understands the world is learned;
Who understands the self is gentle.
Who conquers the world has strength;
Who conquers the self has harmony.
Who is determined has purpose;
Who is contented has wealth.
Who defends his home may long endure;
Who surrenders his home may long survive it.

34. Control

Flow rises and ebbs, creating and destroying,
Implementing all the world, attending to the tiniest details,
Claiming nothing in return.

It nurtures all things,
Though it does not control them;
It has no intention,
So it seems inconsequential.

It is the substance of all things;
Though it does not control them;
It has no exception,
So it seems all-important.

The gentle would not control the world;
They are in harmony with the world.

35. Peace

If you offer music and food
Strangers may stop with you;
But if you provide for flow
All the people of the world will keep you
In safety, health, community, and peace.

Flow lacks art and flavor;
It can neither be seen nor heard,
But its benefit cannot be exhausted.

36. Opposition

To reduce someone's influence, first expand it;
To reduce someone's force, first increase it;
To overthrow someone, first exalt them;
To take from someone, first give to them.

This is the subtlety by which the weak overcome the strong,
For fish should not leave their depths,
And swords should not leave their scabbards.

37. Tranquillity

Flow takes no action, but leaves nothing undone.
When you accept this
The world will flourish,
In harmony with nature.

Nature does not possess desire;
Without desire, the heart becomes quiet;
In this way the whole world is made tranquil.

Part 2

38. Ritual

Well established hierarchies are not easily uprooted;
Closely held beliefs are not easily let go;
So ritual enthralls generation after generation.

Harmony does not care for harmony, and so is naturally attained;
But ritual is intent upon harmony, and so can not attain it.

Harmony neither acts nor reasons;
Love acts, but without reason;
Justice acts to serve reason;
Ritual acts to enforce reason.

When flow is lost, there remains harmony;
When harmony is lost, there remains love;
When love is lost, there remains justice;
When justice is lost, there remains ritual.

Ritual is the end of compassion and honesty,
The beginning of confusion;
Faith is a colorful hope or fear,
The beginning of folly.

The gentle go by harmony, not by hope;
They live on the fruit, not the flower;
They accept substance, and ignore appearance.

39. Support

In mythical times all things were whole:
All the sky was clear,
All the earth was stable,
All the mountains were firm,
All the riverbeds were full,
All of nature was fertile,

And all the rulers were supported.

But, losing clarity, the sky tore;
Losing stability, the earth split;
Losing strength, the mountains sank;
Losing water, the riverbeds cracked;
Losing fertility, nature disappeared;
And losing support, the rulers fell.

Now rulers depend upon their subjects,
The noble depend upon the humble;
And rulers call themselves orphaned, hungry, and alone,
To win the people's support.

40. Movement

The movement of flow is cycle;
The use of flow is acceptance;
All things depend on flow,
But flow depends on nothing.

41. Laugh

When the gentle learn flow, they use it with diligence;
When the common learn flow, they use it on occasion;
When the mean learn flow, they laugh out loud;
Those who do not laugh, do not learn it.

Therefore it is said:
Who understands flow seems foolish;
Who progresses with flow seems to fail;
Who follows flow seems to wander.

For the finest harmony appears plain;
The brightest truth appears colored;
The richest character appears incomplete;
The bravest heart appears meek;
The simplest nature appears inconstant.

The square, perfected, has no corner;
Music, perfected, has no melody;
Love, perfected, has no climax;
Art, perfected, has no meaning.

So flow can be neither sensed nor known:
It transmits sensation and transcends knowledge.

42. Teaching

Flow bears sensation,
Sensation bears anticipation,
Sensation and anticipation bear distinction,
And distinction bears all the world;
Each thing in the world bears feeling and doing,
And, imbued with mind, harmony with flow.

As others have taught, so do I teach,
"Who loses harmony opposes nature";
This is the root of my teaching.

43. Overcoming

Water overcomes the wall;
Without substance it requires no breach;
This is the benefit of taking no action.

Yet benefit without action,
Like experience without intention,
Is practiced by very few.

44. Cost

Flesh or fame: which is dearer?
Health or possessions: which is worth more?
Profit or loss: which is more costly?

Great love incurs great loss,
And great riches great fear.
Only contentment comes at no cost;
Who knows when to stop
Does not continue into danger,
And may long endure.

45. Quiet

Great perfection seems incomplete,
But does not decay;
Great abundance seems empty,
But does not fail.

Great truth seems paradox;
Great cleverness seems foolish;
Great eloquence seems simple.

As spring overcomes the cold,
And autumn overcomes the heat,
So calm and quiet overcome the world.

46. Horses

When a nation follows flow,
Horses bear manure through its fields;
When a nation ignores flow,
Horses bear soldiers through its streets.

There is no greater mistake than following desire;
There is no greater disaster than forgetting contentment;
There is no greater sickness than seeking attainment;
But one who is content to satisfy his needs
Finds that contentment endures.

47. Knowing

Without stepping outdoors
You know the whole world;
Without peeping through the window
You know the color of the sky.

The more you experience,
The less you know.
The gentle wander without knowing,
See without looking,
Accomplish without acting.

48. Inaction

The follower of knowledge learns as much as he can every day;
The follower of flow forgets as much as he can every day.

By attrition he reaches a state of inaction
Wherein he does nothing, but nothing remains undone.

To conquer the world, accomplish nothing;
If you must accomplish something,
The world remains beyond conquest.

49. People

The gentle do not distinguish between self and world;
The needs of other people are as their own.

They are good to those who are good;
They are also good to those who are not good,
Thereby they are good.
They trust those who are trustworthy;
They also trust those who are not trustworthy,
Thereby they are trustworthy.

The gentle live in harmony with the world,
And their mind is the world's mind.

So they nurture the worlds of others
As a mother does her children.

50. Death

Men flow into life, and ebb into death.

Some are filled with life;
Some are empty with death;
Some hold fast to life, and thereby perish;
For them, life is but an ideal.

Those who are filled with life
Need not fear tigers and rhinoceri in the wilds,
Nor wear armor and shields in battle;
For the rhino finds no place in them for its horn,
The tiger no place for its claw,
The soldier no place for a weapon.
It is as if death has no use for them.

51. Nurture

Flow bears all things;
Harmony nurtures them;
Nature shapes them;
Use completes them.

Each follows flow and honors harmony,
Not by law,
But by life.

Flow bears, nurtures, shapes, completes,
Shelters, comforts, and makes a home for them.

Bearing without possessing,
Nurturing without taming,
Shaping without forcing,
This is harmony.

52. Tact

The source of the world is as its mother;
To understand the mother, study the child;
Embrace the child, and you embrace its mother,
Who lives on when the child is long dead.

Reserve your judgments and words
And you maintain your influence;
Speak your mind and take positions
And nothing can save you.

As observing detail is clarity,
So maintaining flexibility is strength;
Use the light but shed no light,
So that you incur no risk,
But maintain tact.

53. Difficult Paths

With but a small understanding
One may treat flow like a highway,
Fearing only to leave it;
Following a highway is easy,
Yet people delight in difficult paths.

When palaces are kept up
Fields are left to weeds
And granaries empty;
Wearing fine clothes,
Bearing sharp swords,
Glutting with food and drink,
Hoarding wealth and possessions -
These are the ways of theft,
And far from flow.

54. Cultivate Harmony

Cultivate harmony within yourself, and harmony becomes real;
Cultivate harmony within your family, and harmony becomes fertile;
Cultivate harmony within your community, and harmony becomes abundant;
Cultivate harmony within your culture, and harmony becomes enduring;
Cultivate harmony within the world, and harmony becomes ubiquitous.

Live with a person to understand the person;
Live with a family to understand the family;
Live with a community to understand the community;
Live with a culture to understand the culture;
Live with the world to understand the world.

How can I live with the world?
By accepting.

55. Soft Bones

Who is filled with harmony is like a newborn.
Wasps and snakes will not bite him;
Hawks and tigers will not claw him.

His bones are soft yet his grasp is sure,
For his flesh is supple;
His mind is innocent yet his body is virile,
For his vigor is plentiful;
He sings all day yet his voice is sweet,
For his harmony is perfect.

But knowing harmony creates appearance,
And pursuing appearance creates ritual.
Exceeding nature creates calamity,
And controlling nature creates violence.

56. Impartiality

Who understands does not preach;
Who preaches does not understand.

Reserve your judgments and words;
Smooth differences and forgive disagreements;
Dull your wit and simplify your purpose;
Accept the world.

Then,
Friendship and enmity,
Profit and loss,
Honor and disgrace,
Will not affect you;
The world will accept you.

57. Conquer with Inaction

Do not control the people with laws,
Nor violence, nor espionage,
But conquer them with inaction.

For:
The more morals and taboos there are,
The more cruelty afflicts people;
The more guns and knives there are,
The more factions divide people;
The more arts and skills there are,
The more change obsoletes people;
The more laws and taxes there are,
The more theft corrupts people.

Yet take no action, and people nurture each other;
Make no laws, and people deal fairly with each other;
Exact no interest, and people cooperate with each other;
Pursue no end, and people harmonize with each other.

58. No End

When government is lazy and informal
The people are kind and honest;
When government is efficient and severe

The people are discontented and deceitful.

Good fortune follows upon disaster;
Disaster lurks within good fortune;
Who can say how things will end?
Perhaps there is no end.

Honesty is ever deceived;
Kindness is ever seduced;
Men have been like this for a long time.

So the gentle are firm but not cutting,
Pointed but not piercing,
Straight but not rigid,
Bright but not blinding.

59. Restraint

Manage a great nation as you would cook a delicate fish.

To govern men in accord with nature
It is best to be restrained;
Restraint makes agreement easy to attain,
And easy agreement builds harmonious relationships;
With sufficient harmony no resistance will arise;
When no resistance arises, then you possess the heart of the nation,
And when you possess the nation's heart, your influence will endure:
Deeply rooted and firmly established.
This is the method of far sight and long life.

60. Demons

When you use flow to conquer the world,
Your demons will lose their power to harm.
It's not that they lose their power as such,
But that they won't harm others;
Because they won't harm others,
You won't harm others:
When neither you nor your demons can do harm,

You will be at peace with them.

61. Submission

A nation is like a hierarchy, a marketplace, and a maiden.
A maiden wins a husband by submitting to his advances;
Submission is a means of union.

So when a large country submits to a small country
It will adopt the small country;
When a small country submits to a large country
It will be adopted by the large country;
The one submits and adopts;
The other submits and is adopted.

It is in the interest of a large country to unite and gain service,
And in the interest of a small country to unite and gain patronage;
If both would serve their interests,
Both must submit.

62. Gift

Flow is the fate of men,
The treasure of the saint,
And the refuge of the sinner.

Fine words are often borrowed,
And great deeds are often appropriated;
Therefore, when a person falls, do not abandon them,
And when a person gains power, do not honor them;
Remain impartial and offer flow.

Why should others appreciate flow?
The ancients said, "In this way, those who seek may easily find,
And those who regret may easily absolve,"
So flow is the most precious gift.

63. Difficulty

Practice no-action;
Attend to do-nothing;
Taste the flavorless,
Magnify the small,
Multiply the few,
Return love for hate.

Deal with the difficult while it is yet easy;
Deal with the great while it is yet small;

The difficult develops naturally from the easy,
And the great from the small;
So the gentle, by dealing with the small,
Achieve the great.

Who finds it easy to promise finds it hard to be trusted;
Who takes things lightly makes things difficult;
The gentle recognize difficulty, and so have none.

64a. Care at the Beginning

What lies still is easy to grasp;
What lies far off is easy to anticipate;
What is brittle is easy to shatter;
What is small is easy to disperse.

Yet a tree broader than a man can embrace is born of a tiny shoot;
A dam greater than a river can overrun starts with a clod of earth;
A journey of a thousand miles begins at the spot under one's feet.

Therefore deal with things before they happen;
Create order before there is confusion.

64b. Care at the End

He who acts, spoils;
He who grasps, loses.

People often fail on the verge of success;
Take care at the end as at the beginning,
So that you may avoid failure.

The gentle desire no-desire,
Value no-value,
Learn no-learning,
And return to the places people have forgotten;
They would help all people to become natural,
But then they would not be natural.

65. Subtlety

The ancients did not seek to rule people with knowledge,
But to help them become natural.

It is difficult for knowledgeable people to become natural;
So to use law to control a nation weakens the nation,
But to use nature to control a nation strengthens the nation.

Understanding these two paths is understanding subtlety;
Subtlety runs deep, ranges wide,
Dissolves confusion and preserves peace.

66. Lead by Following

The river carves out the valley by flowing beneath it.
Thereby the river is the master of the valley.

In order to master people
One must speak as their servant;
In order to lead people
One must follow them.

So when the gentle rise above the people,
They do not feel oppressed;
And when the gentle stand before the people,
They do not feel hindered.

So support for the gentle does not fail,
They do not contend, and none contend against them.

67. Three Treasures

All the world says,
"I am important;
I am distinguished from all the world.
I am separate because I am distinguished,
Were I common, I would be unimportant."

Yet here are three treasures
That I cherish and commend to you:
The first is compassion,
By which one finds courage.
The second is reserve,
By which one finds strength.
And the third is commonality,
By which one finds influence.

Those who are courageous, yet careless,
Strong, yet impetuous,
Or influential, yet separate,
Cannot endure.

68. Compassion

Compassion is the finest weapon and best defence.
If you would establish harmony,
Compassion must surround you like a fortress.

Furthermore,
A good soldier does not inspire fear;
A good fighter does not display aggression;
A good conqueror does not favor battle;
A good leader does not exercise force.

This is the value of commonality;
This is how to win the cooperation of others;

This to how to build the same harmony that is in nature.

69. Reserve

There is a saying among soldiers:
It is easier to lose a yard than take an inch.

In this way one may deploy troops without marshalling them,
Bring weapons to bear without exposing them,
Engage the foe without invading them,
And exhaust their strength without fighting them.

Still there is nothing worse than misunderstanding your foe;
To do so endangers all of these treasures;
When a well-matched force opposes yours,
Find a way for them to live.

70. Individuality

My words are easy to understand
And my actions are easy to perform
Yet none other can understand or perform them.

My words have meaning; my actions have reason;
Yet these cannot be known and I cannot be known.

We are each unique, and thereby valuable;
Though the gentle wear coarse clothes, their hearts are jade.

71. Limitation

Those who know their limits are healthy;
Those Who ignore their limits are sick.
The gentle know this sickness as a limit,
And so become immune.

72. Revolution

When people have nothing to lose,
Then revolution will result.

Do not take away their lands,
And do not destroy their livelihoods;
If your burden is not heavy they will not shirk it.

Gentle rulers maintain themselves but exact no tribute,
Value themselves but require no honors,
Ignore appearance and accept substance.

73. Fate

The brave and bold perish;
The brave and subtle profit.
The subtle profit where the bold perish
For fate does not honor daring.
And even the gentle dare not tempt fate.

Fate does not attack, yet all things succumb to it;
It does not ask, yet all things answer it;
It does not call, yet all things meet it;
It does not plan, yet it determines all things.

Fate's net is vast and its mesh is coarse,
Yet none escape it.

74. Execution

If people were not afraid of death,
Then what would be the use of an executioner?

If people feared only death,
No one would dare disobey.

Again what would be the use of an executioner?

People fear death because death is an instrument of fate.
When people are killed by execution rather than by fate,
This is like carving wood in place of the carpenter.
Those who carve wood in place of the carpenter
Often lose their fingers.

75. Rebellion

When rulers take grain so that they may feast,
Their people become hungry;
When rulers take action to serve their own ambition,
Their people become rebellious;
When rulers take lives so that their own lives are maintained,
Their people no longer fear death.

When people act without regard for their own lives
They overcome those who value only their own lives.

76. Flexibility

A newborn is soft and tender,
A crone, gnarled and stiff.
Plants and animals, in life, are supple and succulent;
In death, withered and dry.
So softness and tenderness are attributes of life,
Hardness and stiffness, attributes of death.

Just as a sapless tree will split and decay
So an inflexible force will meet defeat;
The hard and mighty lie beneath the ground
While the tender and weak dance on the breeze above.

77. Need

Is the action of nature not unlike drawing a bow?
What is higher is pulled down, and what is lower is raised;
What is taller is shortened, and what is thinner is broadened;
Nature's motion decreases those who have more than they need
And increases those who need more than they have.

It is not so with men.
Men decrease those who need more than they have
And increase those who have more than they need.

To give away what you do not need is flow.
So the gentle give without expectation,
Accomplish without claiming credit,
And desire no ostentation.

78. Yielding

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water,
Yet nothing can better overcome the hard and strong,
For they can neither control nor destroy it.

The soft overcomes the hard,
The yielding overcomes the strong;
Every person knows this,
But few practice it.

Who attends to the people would regulate the land and grain;
Who attends to the state would regulate the whole world;
Truth is easily obscured by rhetoric.

79. Reconciliation

When conflict is reconciled, some hard feelings remain;
This is dangerous.

The gentle accept less than is due
And do not blame or punish;
For harmony seeks accord
Where justice seeks payment.

The ancients said: "Nature is impartial;
Therefore it serves those who serve all."

80. Small Places

Let your community be small, with only a few people;
Keep tools in abundance, but do not depend upon them;
Appreciate your life and be content with your home;
Sail boats and ride horses, but don't go too far;
Keep weapons and armor, but do not employ them;
Let everyone read and write,
Eat well and make beautiful things.

Live peacefully and delight in your own society;
Dwell within cock-crow of your neighbors,
But maintain your independence from them.

81. The Enlightened

Honest people use no rhetoric;
Rhetoric is not honesty.
Wise people are not cultured;
Culture is not wisdom.
Content people are not rich;
Riches are not contentment.

So the gentle do not serve themselves;
The more they do for others, the more they are satisfied;
The more they give, the more they receive.
Nature flourishes at the expense of no one;
So the gentle benefit all and contend against none.

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