

POEMS SELECTED FROM *TAO TE CHING*

Lao Tsu

--Trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English

ONE

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the beginning of the heaven and earth.  
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.  
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;  
    this appears as darkness.  
Darkness within darkness.  
The gate to all mystery.

FOUR

The Tao is an empty vessel; it is used, but never filled.  
Oh, unfathomable source of ten thousand things!  
Blunt the sharpness,  
Untangle the know,  
Soften the glare,  
Merge with dust.  
Oh, hidden deep but ever present!  
I do not know from whence it come.  
It is the forefather of the emperors.

FIVE

Heaven and earth are ruthless;  
They see the ten thousand things as dummies.  
The wise are ruthless;  
They see the people as dummies.

The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.  
The shape changes but not the form;  
The more it moves, the more it yields.  
More words count less.  
Hold fast to the center.

## EIGHT

The highest good is like water.  
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.  
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

In dwelling, be close to the land.  
In meditation, go deep in the heart.  
In dealing with others, be gentle and kind.  
In speech, be true.  
In ruling, be just.  
In business, be competent.  
In action, watch the timing.

No fight: No blame.

## FOURTEEN

Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form.  
Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound.  
Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible.  
These three are indefinable;  
Therefore they are jointed in one.

From above it is not bright;  
From below it is not dark:  
An unbroken thread beyond description.  
It returns to nothingness.  
The form of the formless,  
the image of the imageless,  
It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.

Stand before it and there is no beginning.  
Follow it and there is no end.  
Stay with the ancient Tao,  
Move with the present.

Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao.

*[The Way It Is]*

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.*

*You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
Or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

*--William Stafford]*

## SIXTEEN

Empty yourself of everything.  
Let the mind rest at peace.  
The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.  
They grow and flourish and then return to the source.  
Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.  
The way of nature is unchanging.  
Knowing constancy is insight.  
Not knowing constancy leads to disaster.  
With an open mind, you will be openhearted.  
Being openhearted, you will act royally.  
Being royal, you will attain the divine.  
Being divine, you will be at one with the Tao.  
Being at one with the Tao is eternal.  
And though the body dies, the Tao will never pass away.

## EIGHTEEN

When the great Tao is forgotten,  
Kindness and morality arise.  
When wisdom and intelligence are born,  
The great pretense begins.

When there is no peace within the family,  
Filial piety and devotion arise.  
When the country is confused and in chaos,  
Loyal ministers appear.

## NINETEEN

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom,  
And it will be a hundred times better for everyone.

Give up kindness, renounce morality,  
And men will rediscover filial piety and love.

Give up ingenuity, renounce profit,  
And bandits and thieves will disappear.

These three are outward forms alone; they are not sufficient in themselves.  
It is more important  
To see the simplicity,  
To realize one's true nature,  
To cast off selfishness  
And temper desire.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Something mysteriously formed,  
Born before heaven and earth.  
In the silence and the void,  
Standing alone and unchanging,  
Ever present and in motion.  
Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things.  
I do not know its name.  
Call it Tao.  
For lack of a better word, I call it great.

Being great, it flows.  
It flows far away.  
Having gone far, it returns.

Therefore, "Tao is great;  
Heaven is great;  
Earth is great;  
The king is also great."

These are the four great powers  
of the universe,  
And the king is one of them.

Man follows the earth.  
Earth follows heaven.  
Heaven follows the Tao.  
Tao follows what is natural.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Know the strength of a man,  
But keep a woman's care!  
Be the stream of the universe!  
Being the stream of the universe,  
Ever true and unswerving,  
Become a little child once more.

Know the white,  
But keep the black!  
Be an example to the world!  
Being an example to the world,  
Ever true and unwavering,  
Return to the infinite.

Know honor,  
Yet keep humility.  
Be the valley of the universe!  
Being the valley of the universe,  
Ever true and resourceful,  
Return to the state of the uncarved block.

When the block is carved, it becomes useful.  
When the sage uses it, he becomes the ruler.  
Thus, "A great tailor cuts little."

## TWENTY-NINE

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?  
I do not believe it can be done.

The universe is sacred.  
You cannot improve it.  
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.  
If you try to hold it, you will lose it.

So sometimes things are ahead and sometimes they are behind;  
Sometimes breathing is hard, sometimes it comes easily;  
Sometimes there is strength and sometimes weakness;  
Sometimes one is up and sometimes down.

Therefore the sage avoids extremes, excesses, and complacency.

### THIRTY-ONE

Good weapons are instrument of fear; all creatures hate them.  
Therefore followers of Tao never use them.  
The wise man prefers the left,  
The man of war prefers the right.

Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools.  
He uses them only when he has no choice.  
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,  
And victory no cause for rejoicing.  
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing;  
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself.

On happy occasions precedence is given to the left,  
On sad occasions to the right.  
In the army the general stands on the left,  
The commander-in-chief on the right.  
This means that war is conducted like a funeral.  
When many people are being killed,  
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.  
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.

### THIRTY-SIX

That which shrinks  
Must first expand.  
That which fails  
Must first be strong.  
That which is cast down  
Must first be raised.  
Before receiving  
There must be giving.

This is called perception of the nature of things.  
Soft and weak overcome hard and strong.

Fish cannot leave deep waters,  
And a country's weapons should not be displayed.

## FORTY

Returning is the motion of the Tao.  
Yielding is the way of the Tao.  
The ten thousand things are born of being.  
Being is born of not being.

## FORTY-ONE

The wise student hears of the Tao and practices it diligently,  
The average student hears of the Tao and gives it thought now and again,  
The foolish student hears of the Tao and laughs aloud.  
If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is.

Hence is=t is said:

The bright path seems dim;  
Going forward seems like retreat;  
The easy way seems hard;  
The highest Virtue seems empty;  
Great purity seems sullied;  
A wealth of Virtue seems inadequate;  
The Strength of Virtue seems frail;  
Real Virtue seems unreal;  
The perfect square has no corners;  
Great talents ripen late;  
The highest notes are hard to hear;  
The greatest form has no shape.  
The Tao is hidden and without name.  
The Tao alone nourishes and brings everything to fulfillment.

## FORTY-THREE

The softest thing in the universe  
Over comes the hardest thing in the universe.  
That without substance can enter where there is no room.  
Hence I know the value of non-action.

Teaching without words and work without doing  
are understood by very few.