

# Wu Wei: Effortless Action

One of the central ideas in the *Daodjing* of *Laozi* is the idea of *wu wei* (无为, simplified 无为; *wúwéi*). This has been translated in many ways: “non-action,” “actionlessness,” “effortless action,” and “doing nothing.” The 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Daodjing* considers *wu wei* an attribute of the eternal *Dao*. The 48<sup>th</sup> chapter promotes *wu wei* as a human virtue. The illustration shows *wu wei* in regular script (left) and in cursive (right).

## Being True to Oneself

A foundational concept in Daoism is 自然, *zìrán*. This word is composed of 自 (self, oneself, from, since) and 然 (right, correct, so, in this manner). Almost impossible to translate, the word has been variously rendered simply as “self-so” (Ziporyn, 2009) or more abstractly as “as-it-is-ness” (Fu, 1973, p 382). The meaning contains the idea of acting “naturally” or “spontaneously.” An underlying concept is “authenticity” – one’s action should be true to one’s nature.

Laozi uses the word in the ending to Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* (with translation by Wu, 2016):

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Man follows the ways of Earth;  
Earth follows the ways of Heaven;  
Heaven follows the ways of *Dao*;  
*Dao* follows its own ways.

Several aspects of *zìrán* need consideration. First, the *Dao* acts through all things. As well as ordering the cosmos, the *Dao* acts through each individual object it contains. Human beings must ultimately follow their own *zìrán*. Zhuang Zhou, commonly known as Zhuangzi (庄子), a Daoist philosopher from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, begins his writings with a description of all

the different things in the universe from the mythological great Peng bird to the morning mushroom, and recommends that one must act “on the rectitude (正, zhèng) of Heaven and Earth” (Lynn, 2022, p 8). Guo Xiang (郭象, 265-312 CE) commented on this section of the *Zhuangzi*

“Heaven and earth” is just a blanket term used to indicate all beings. It is all individual beings that form the very substance of heaven and earth, and it is each being’s self-so [*ziran*] that aligns true to itself. “Self-so” [*ziran*] means what is so of itself [*ziran*], without being done by anyone or for any purpose. Thus, Peng’s ability to fly high and the sparrow’s ability to stay low, the great tree’s ability to last long and the mushroom’s ability to perish quickly, all these are done spontaneously, all are self-so [*ziran*] (Ziporyn, 2009, p 132.)

Second, the concept of *zìrán* does not mean that all things passively accept their lot in the universe. Misha Tadd (2019) argues that *zìrán* has as much to do with “authority” as with “authenticity.” We need to be true to our ideal selves: to seek what we should be rather than accept what we are.

Third, the idea of acting “naturally” means acting in accord with the *Dao*. However, human beings do not need to return to the simple state of primitive societies to do so (Tadd, 2019, p 4). Although the idea of the “noble savage” was popular when the *Daodejing* was initially translated into Western languages, *Laozi* was not being nostalgic for a lost Eden; rather he was imagining a future utopia (Stamatov, 2023).

## **Yet Nothing is Left Undone**

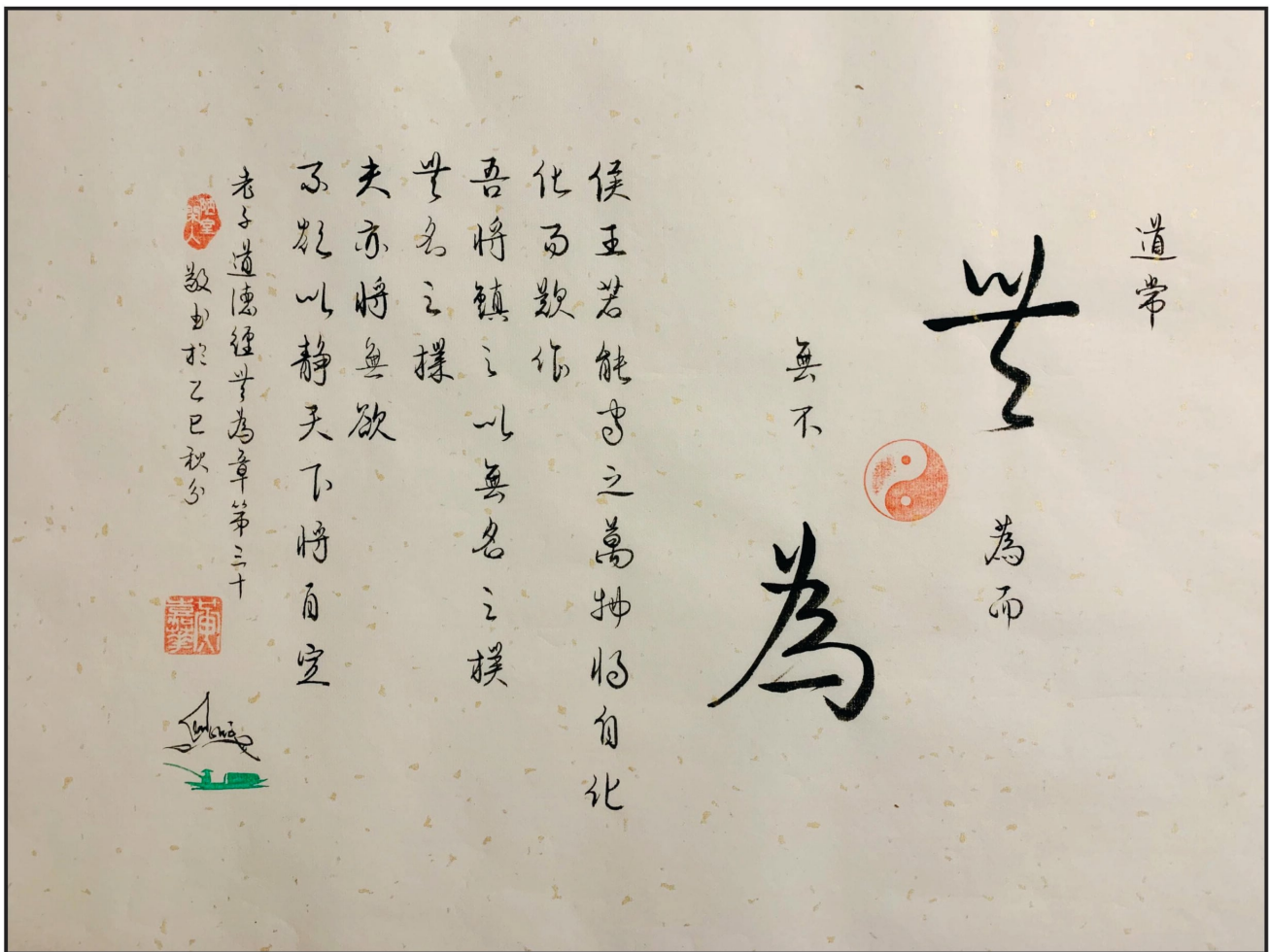
How the *Dao* “follows its own ways” is described in the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Daodejing*. This is the final chapter in the section of the book that deals with the nature of the *Dao*

The commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing* is divided into two parts. The first 37 chapters are concerned with the *Dao* (way), and the next 44 with the nature of *De* (virtue). Some recently discovered early versions reverse the ordering of the two parts (Chan, 2025). However, for our purposes it is appropriate to follow the traditional order and to understand the nature of the *Dao* before we propose a way for human virtue.

The last chapter of the first part states that the eternal *Dao* – the principle that governs the universe – exercises its power by means of *wu wei*. The following is the Chinese text of Chapter 37 together with a translation by Wu (2016) and calligraphy by Ken Wong:

道之在天下  
道之在天下  
道之在天下  
道之在天下  
道之在天下  
道之在天下  
道之在天下

*Dao* in its eternity does nothing, yet nothing is not done.  
If lords and kings can all abide by that, all things will  
change of themselves.  
As they change, their desires start to grow;  
I calm them down with the nameless pristine timber.  
Calmed by the nameless pristine timber, they will have no  
more desire.  
Desireless and calm, the world will correct its own course.



The phrase 無不為 is usually translated as “nameless simplicity” (e.g., Fischer, 2023). The character 無 (*pǔ*), another version of which is 樸, generally means “simple.” However, it once meant “unworked wood” – hence the “nameless pristine timber” of Wu’s translation.

The famous first line is shown below in a character-by-character translation:

道	恆	無(无)	為(为)	而	無(无)	不	為(为)
dào	héng	wú	wèi	ér	wú	bù	wèi
way	eternal	nothing	do	and yet	nothing	not	do
path	constant		act	but			act
	enduring		govern				govern

The translation of *wu wei* (無為) is problematic. A simple translation is “doing nothing” but that is not *Laozi’s* meaning. In Chapter 37 the *Dao* does nothing and yet somehow everything is done. The following are suggested translations of *wu wei*: “non-action” (Moeller, 2016), “effortless action” (Slingerland, 2003), “unself-conscious action” (Lynn, 2022, p 3), “non-contrivance” (Fischer, 2023, p 27), and “no purposive action” (Hansard, 2003).

Loy (1985) proposed that *wu wei* represent “nondual action:” the activity of an individual that has no self (with intentions and goals) but is rather part of a universal self. This can eliminate the problem of free will in a deterministic universe:

whenever “I” act it is not “I” but the whole universe that “does” the action or rather is the action. If we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom.

Slingerland (2003, p 7) comments

It is important to realize, however, that *wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. ... It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of conventional morality.

Fischer (2023, p 27) describes the mental concomitant of *wu*

*wei*:

It describes the state of acting genuinely, unselfconsciously, or, as we might say, “from the heart,” as opposed to doing something self-consciously, because others expect you to, or because you are coerced.

## Decreasing Day by Day

In the 48<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Daodejing* Laozi proposes *wu wei* as the ideal of human behavior. The following is the Chinese text together with a translation by Wu (2016):

□□□□□□□□  
□□□□□□□□  
□□□□□□  
□□□□□□  
□□□□□□□□□□

To pursue learning you increase day by day; to pursue *Dao* you decrease day by day.

Decrease and yet again decrease, till you reach the state of Non-doing.

Do nothing and yet nothing is not done.

The world is often won without busying around;

When busying around occurs, the world cannot be won.

The third line repeats the first line of Chapter 37 as an injunction for human behavior. We must follow the same principle as the *Dao*. Although it is easy to say that the *Dao* can act according to its own self, how exactly human beings can do so is clear. The chapter states that the world can only be won without □ (*shì*, business/work/responsibility).

The *Zhuangzi* provides several examples of acting in accord with *wu wei*, the most famous example being butcher Ding. The story is introduced with the comments:

The flow of my life is always channeled by its own boundaries, but the mind bent on knowledge never is. A flow channeled by its own boundaries is endangered when forced to follow something that is not, and trying to rescue it with the doings of the knowing mind only makes the danger worse. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 21).

King Hui of Liang was very impressed with the skill of his butcher Ding who was able to cut up an ox with remarkable speed and agility. When asked how he had become so adept, Ding replied:

What I love is the Course [*Dao*], something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 22).

One might simply understand that through years of study and



Where there is insufficient good faith,  
there is loss of faith.

Relax and spare your words.

When the goal is achieved and the job is done,  
everyone says, "We did it."

*Laozi* favors the ruler who exercises *wu wei*, who allows his ministers to exercise their responsibilities, and who lets his people to be true to their own selves: 自然, *ziran*. Another translation of the final line is: The people all say: "We have done it by ourselves." (Lin, 1977)

These ideas on government were extensively discussed in the *Huainanzi*, a collection of writings collected to assist the Prince of Huainan in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (Ames, 1981). The following is from one of the essays entitled *The Art of Rulership*:

Thus, the ruler in possession of the Way extinguishes thought and dispenses with guessing, and waiting in limpidity and vacuity, he uses words that do not boast and takes action that does not rob subordinates of responsibility. He makes demands of fulfilment according to claims made. He lets them get on with their duties without telling them how; he expects them to fulfil their duties without instructing them. He takes not knowing as his Way and being at a loss as to what to do as his treasure. Acting in this way, each of the various officials has his appointed tasks. (Ames, 1981, p 202)

## **The Concept of Flow**

Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1934-2021), a Hungarian-American psychologist, became interested in why people can become so completely involved in difficult, time-consuming and sometimes dangerous activities, that they lose all sense of self and time. He described the experience as one of "flow"

(Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi (in Csíkszentmihályi, 2014, p 240) describe the following subjective characteristics of being “in flow:”

1. Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
2. Merging of action and awarenessLoss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
3. A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
4. Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
5. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process.

Athletes during peak performance, musicians during virtuoso recitals, and scientists formulating a new theory all experience this state of flow. Other terms that have been used to describe it are “in the zone” or “being locked in.” The individual in the flow is fully conscious of what is going on, but there is little if any self-consciousness. The game is being played, the music is being made, the theory is being grasped.

This state can only come after one has become an expert. Only when the actions can occur automatically, can consciousness move to a higher level – directing the strategy of the game rather than making individual movements, conveying the meaning rather than playing the notes, finding the underlying pattern rather than simply recording what is happening.

A person in a state of flow is very similar to a person acting according to the principle of *wu wei* (De Pryker, 2011). Both are acting effortlessly and without self-consciousness. In

both action and awareness are fused. There are differences – flow empowers the individual self, whereas *wu wei* leads to a decrease in personal desires as one seeks greater union with the universal self. Nevertheless, the two states are far more similar than different.

In recent years, the concepts of *wu wei* have been used to promote higher achievements in sports (Kee et al. 2021) and to find happiness in normal human behavior through “effortless living” (Gregory, 2018). A major difficulty is in deciding how to attain *wu wei*. One must become highly skilled and then become so completely involved in something that one loses oneself in the endeavor. One can try to be “mindful,” to live in the present, to eliminate personal desires, but such advice is imprecise.

### **The Flow of Calligraphy**

Chapters 37 and 48 of the *Daodejing* – the chapters that are crucial to the concept of *wu wei* are shown below in the calligraphy of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Zhao Mengfu in regular script, and of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Sheng Mao in clerical script):

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為  
 無為而無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及  
 其有事不足以取天下

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為無為而  
 無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及其事不足以  
 取天下

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬  
 物將自化而欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無  
 名之樸亦將不欲不欲以靜天下將自正

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬物將自化而  
 欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無名之樸亦將不欲不  
 欲以靜天下將自正

The esthetics of Chinese calligraphy depends on the flow from one character to another. The true calligrapher follows the principle of *wu wei* and writes effortlessly. Chiang Yee (1973, p 117) describes the essential characteristics of Chinese calligraphy:

The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, not of designed and motionless shape. A finished piece of it is not a symmetrical arrangement of

conventional shapes, but something like the co-ordinated movements of a skilfully composed dance –impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.

## **Envoi**

We can conclude with some comments of the poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his introduction to his free translations from the *Zhuangzi* (2004, p 21):

The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but perfect action—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed “rightly,” in perfect accord with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not “conditioned” or “limited” by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.

And an excerpt from his translation (p. 69):

If man, born in Tao,  
Sinks into the deep shadow  
Of non-action  
To forget aggression and concern,  
He lacks nothing  
His life is secure.

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# Laozi: the Nature of the Dao

Laozi (老子, *lǎozǐ*, “the old master”) was a legendary character from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE who put together a collection of philosophical and ethical sayings that has come to be known as the *Dàodéjing* (道德經 simplified: 道德经; or *Tao Te Ching* in the Wade-Giles romanization, “The Book of the Way and of Virtue”) or *Laozi* after the name of the author. The illustration shows a depiction of Laozi from a scroll by Sheng Mao. Following the discovery of early versions of the text written on silk and bamboo slips dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (Chan, 2016, 2025), several new translations and annotated editions have been published. This essay presents a close reading of the first chapter.

## The First Chapter

The following is the Chinese text of the first chapter (which can be followed at the websites of the Chinese Text Project or Wikibooks) and a recent English translation by Fischer (2023).

道可道也，非恒道也。  
名可名也，非恒名也。  
無名，萬物之始。  
有名，萬物之母。  
無常，道之謂也。

The way that can be (fully) conveyed is not the abiding Way; a name that can be (fully) descriptive is not an abiding name.

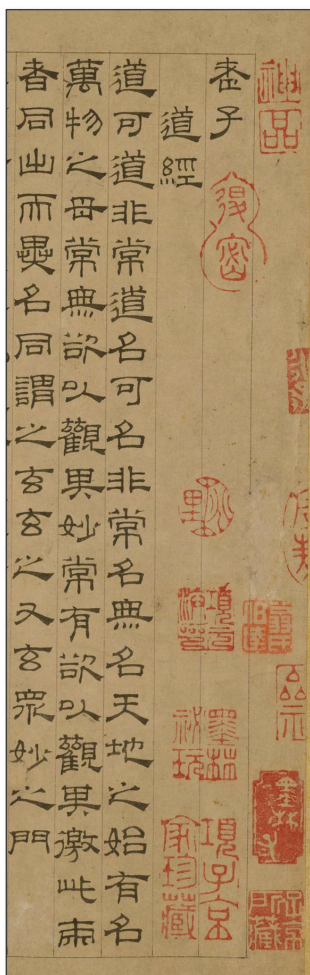
“Formlessness” is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “form” is the name of the mother of the myriad things.

Thus, if you abide in formlessness, you may thereby observe its wonders; and if you abide in form, you may thereby

observe its manifestations.

These two appear together but have different names. This togetherness, we call it “mysterious” mystery and more mystery: the gateway to many wonders.

The following illustration shows on the left the first chapter in clerical script from a scroll by Sheng Mao (生毛, fl. 14<sup>th</sup> Century) in the Palace Museum in Beijing, and on the right in regular script from a scroll by Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫, 1254–1322). The latter includes a portrait of Laozi as a benevolent old gentleman.

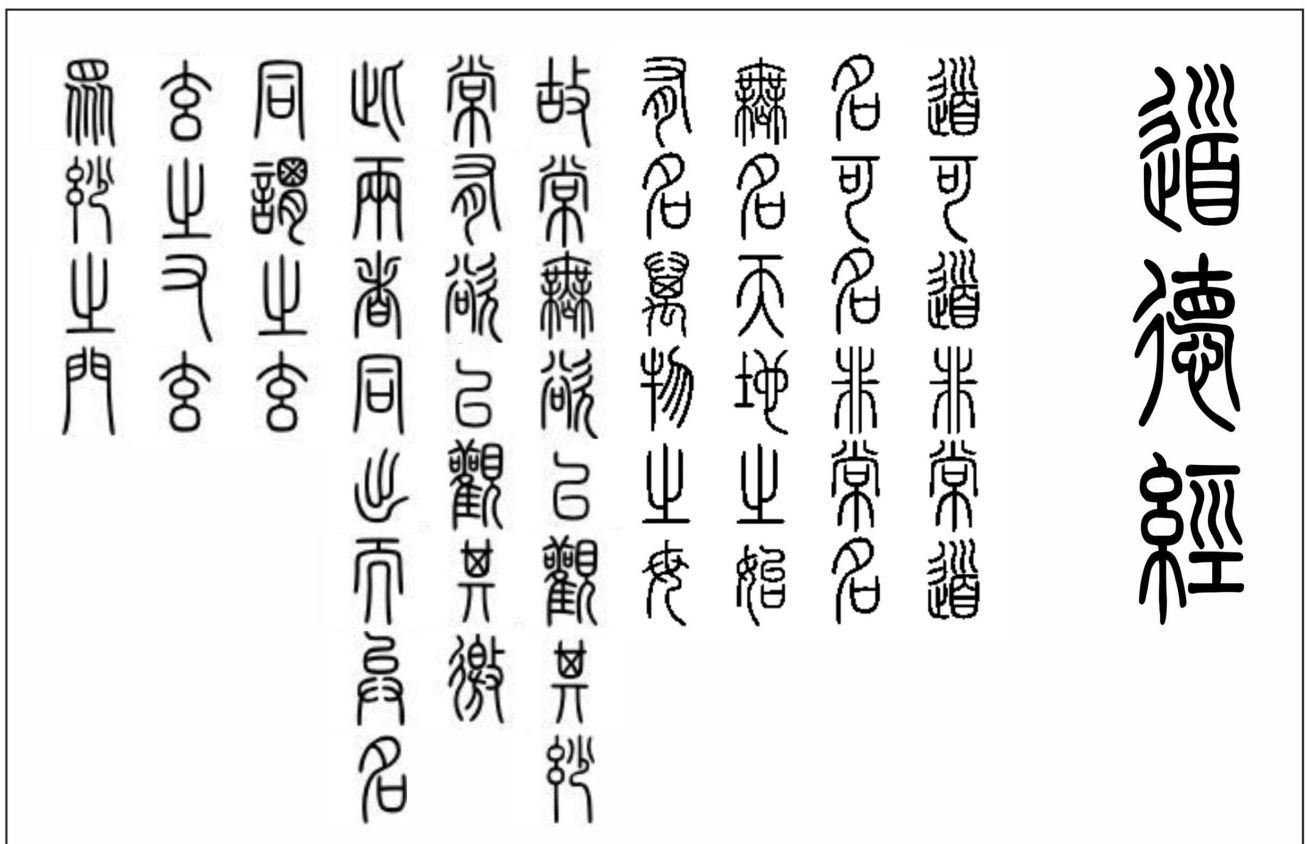


The following is a recitation of the first chapter from the dao-de-jing website, and the text in pinyin romanization:

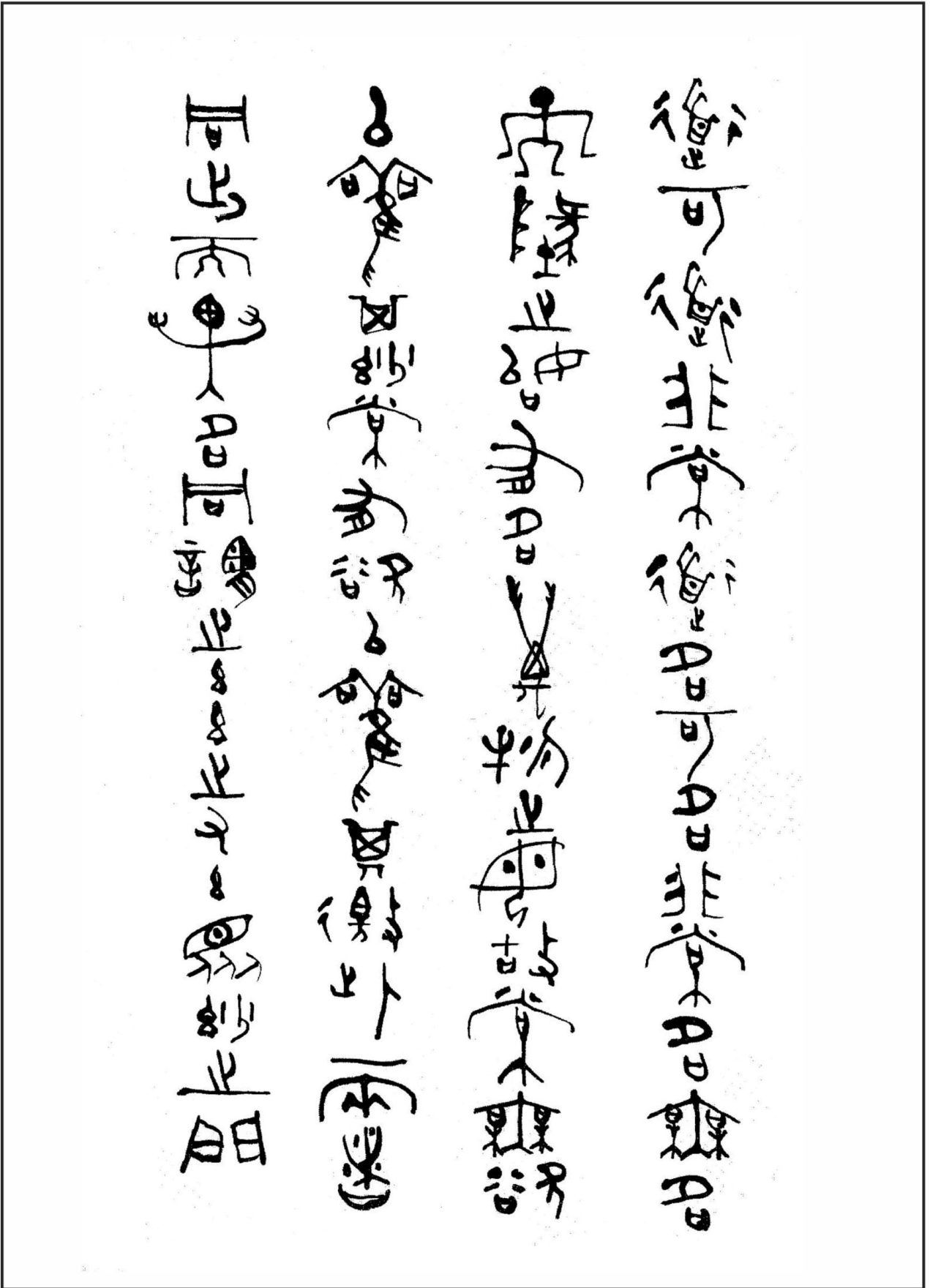
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/chapt>

dào kě dào fēi cháng dào  
míng kě míng fēi cháng míng  
wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ  
yǒu míng wàn wù zhī mǔ  
gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào  
cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiào  
cǐ liǎng zhě tóng chū ér yì míng  
tóng wèi zhī xuán xuán zhī yòu xuán  
zhòng miào zhī mén

The original book of sayings was likely handed down orally. The earliest extant versions were written in clerical script. However, it is possible that there might have been versions of the book written in the Small Seal script, such as imagined in the following illustration:



Or even versions written in the earlier Great Seal or Bronze script, which was used at the time that the book was supposedly created. The illustration on the right shows a Great Seal version of Chapter 1 as imagined by Wilson (2010):



This essay will concern itself with the first chapter (or

verse) of Laozi's book. Red Pine quotes De Qing (1546-1623), a Buddhist commentator, on this chapter:

Laozi's philosophy is all here. The remaining 5000 words only expand on this first verse.

## The Ineffable Dao

The first section of the chapter concerns the difficulty in expressing the nature of Dao:

道	可	道	非	恆	道
<i>dào</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>dào</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>dào</i>
way, path road speak doctrine	can may	speak	not	constant enduring (常, <i>cháng</i> eternal)	way

名	可	名	非	恆	名
<i>míng</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>míng</i>
name describe	can	name	not	constant eternal	name

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

Much of Daoist philosophy is related to the opposing concepts of *Yīn* (阴 simplified 阴 lunar, feminine, passive, cool) and *Yáng* (阳 simplified 阳 solar, masculine, active, warm). The prototypical examples of Yin and Yan are the shady north side of a hill and its sunny south side. Yin and Yang are the two opposite but interacting forces that underly the harmony of the



universe. They can be represented by the *tàijítú* (太极图, utmost extreme symbol), one version of which is shown on the right. The small contrasting circles within in each half show how the opposites are complementary rather than antagonistic.

The first two lines of the *Daodejing* provides two parallel statements on the *Dao* and on its name. These lines thus concern the actual *Dao* and its abstract name, both of which cannot be fully understood by finite beings. Actual and abstract can be considered as one of the dualities composing Yin and Yang.

The first line uses the character 道 *dao* in three ways: first as a noun describing a way or path, second as a verb in the sense of speaking (telling how to follow a path), and third to express the concept of an eternal *Dao* underlying all things. The second line acts in the same way for the character 名 (name). All languages can use the same word as noun and verb, e.g. “change” in English, but this is more common in Chinese.

In later versions of the *Daodejing* the character 恒 (constant) was replaced by 恒 (with a similar meaning), probably because the former was the name of the fifth emperor of the Han dynasty, Lui Heng (203-157 BCE), and therefore a taboo word.

The *Dao* is eternal or everlasting. However,

While everlasting seems apt, describing the Dao as unchanging does not fit. This is because Laozi's Dao serves as the substance of the cosmos and fundamental source and basis of the things of the world. It is eternally transforming and dynamic. (Chen et al., 2020, p 47)

The following is a description of the *Dao* by *Zhuangzi* (莊子, Master Zhuang, Chuang-tzu in the Wade-Giles romanization) a Daoist philosopher who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE (Palmer et al. 1996, pp 50-51):

The great Tao has both reality and expression,  
but it does nothing and has no form.  
It can be passed on, but not received.  
It can be obtained, but not seen.  
It is rooted in its own self,  
existing before Heaven and Earth were born, indeed for  
eternity.  
It gives divinity to the spirits and to the gods.  
It brought to life Heaven and Earth.  
It was before the primal air, yet it cannot be called  
lofty;  
it was below all space and direction, yet it cannot be  
called deep.  
It comes before either Heaven or Earth, yet it cannot be  
called old.

Alan Watts (1975, pp 41-42) commented on the difficulty in describing the *Dao*:

Thus the Tao is the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature, and I call it the Watercourse Way because both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu use the flow of water as its principal metaphor. But it is of the essence of their philosophy that the Tao cannot be defined in words and is not an idea or concept. As Chuang-tzu says, "It may be attained but not seen," or, in other words, felt but not conceived, intuited but not categorized, divined but not

explained. In a similar way, air and water cannot be cut or clutched, and their flow ceases when they are enclosed. There is no way of putting a stream in a bucket or the wind in a bag. Verbal description and definition may be compared to the latitudinal and longitudinal nets which we visualize upon the earth and the heavens to define and enclose the positions of mountains and lakes, planets and stars. But earth and heaven are not cut by these imaginary strings. As Wittgenstein [*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922] said, "Laws, like the law of causation, etc., treat of the network and not of what the network describes."

Chapter 32 of the *Daodejing* ends with the statement (translated by Pepper and Wang, 2021):

Dao in this world is like a stream in the valley  
Flowing into a river,  
into the sea

## **Being and Nothingness**

The second part of the first chapter presents a brief cosmogony

無(无)	名	天	地	之	始
<i>wú</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>dì</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>shǐ</i>
not nothing nonbeing without empty	name	heaven sky	earth ground	of (genitive marker)	begin start

有	名	萬(万)	物	之	母
<i>yǒu</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>wàn</i>	<i>wù</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mǔ</i>
have possess exist being	name	myriad 10000	thing object matter	of	mother

These lines have been interpreted in two distinct ways. The first

reads *wu* 无 [non-presence, lacking, non-being] and *you* 有 [presence, having, being] as the subjects of statements, and name (名) as part of the predicate. The alternative reading takes *wuming* 无名 [without name, nameless] and *youming* 有名 [having name] as the subjects of the statements (Chen et al. 2020, pp 48-49).

Thus we could have

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth  
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

or

Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth  
Named is the mother of all things.

Since Yin and Yang is basic to Laozi's thinking, I have opted to use the first reading which stresses the dichotomy of being

and non-being. Similar ideas are stated in Chapter 40 of the Daodejing:

□□□□□□□□□□

All the things in the world are generated from *you* □,  
*you* □ is generated from *wu* □

There is a difference between □□ (heaven and earth), which encompasses the whole cosmos, and □□ (myriad things), which refers to the many different things within it. However, this distinction may not be necessary since some early sources used □□ in both lines. (Huang, 2024, p 14)

The dichotomy between *you* and *wu* (Hall & Ames, 1998) reflects a foundational issue in philosophy: the nature of Being. This goes back to some of the very earliest records of human thought. The creation hymn of the Hindu RgVeda (composed around 2000 BCE) states that at the beginning of time there was neither existence nor non-existence. The ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) worried about “What is and what is not.” Shakespeare’s Hamlet considered “To be, or not to be, that is the question” and Jean-Paul Sartre compared *L’être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness).

The following is a comment by *Zhuangzi* (Palmer et al. 1996, p 15) on the origins of the universe:

There is the beginning; there is not as yet any beginning of the beginning; there is not as yet a beginning not to be a beginning of the beginning. There is what is, and there is what is not, and it is not easy to say whether what is not, is not; or whether what is, is.

## **The Mother of All Things**

The fourth line of the first chapter proposes a feminine

origin (道, mother) for all things. This idea is repeated in Chapter 6 which describes 玄牝 (xuán pìn, the mysterious female):

谷神不死  
是謂玄牝  
玄牝之門  
是謂天地之根

The spirit of the valley does not die; it has been called the mysterious female

The gate of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.

It is continuous and uninterrupted; its functioning is inexhaustible.

(my translation)

Chapter 25 mentions the 天母 (tiān xià mǔ, the mother of all under heaven):

有物混成  
先天地生  
寂兮寥兮  
獨立而不改

Which has been translated (Wu, 2016, p 57)

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, born before Heaven and Earth,

Soundless and formless, independent and unchanging.

Revolving endlessly, it may be thought of as the Mother of all under Heaven.

I do not know its name; so I just call it *Dao*, and arbitrarily name it Great

Anderson (2021) has noted how the *Daodejing* fully recognizes the female nature of the *Dao*. Most of the world's religions are androcentric: they ignore the divine feminine. At its beginning Daoism understood that the world is based on interacting male and female forces. And that creation comes

from the female.

## From One to Many

The first chapter distinguishes between being and nothingness (*yǒu* 有 and *wu* 无). The 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter recounts the actual process of creation (translation by Wu, 2016):

道生一，  
一生二，  
二生三，  
三生万物。

*Dao* gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two;  
Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to Ten Thousand things.  
All things have Yin on their back and Yang in their embrace;  
The *Qi* of the two converge and become harmony.

The idea of *Yin* on their back and *Yang* in their embrace refers to how we prefer to sit facing the sun with the shadow at our back.

The basic cosmogeny is that the primordial energy of the universe – *qì* (气) – becomes differentiated into two opposing forces of *yin* and *yang*. These then interact to produce the myriad things of the world that exist in harmony *hé* (和).

The one-two-three progression probably just represents the evolution of the many things in the universe. However, Fischer (2023) also considers the possibility

that the “one, two, three” refer to physical energies (一), Yin-Yang, and harmonized physical energies (二). That is: one, a semblance of a form emerges from formless-ness; two, the physical energy that constitutes that semblance is

influenced by the Yin and Yang states that characterize all physical energies; three, once the semblance has morphed, chrysalis-like, into its final “harmonious” form, it has become a stable entity.

## Mystery and Manifestation

The third section of the first chapter has led to several different translations.

故	常	無(无)	欲	以	觀(观)	其	妙
<i>gù</i>	<i>cháng</i>	<i>wú</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>miào</i>
reason cause old	eternal normal usual	without not nothing empty	desire wish want	by in order to	observe see	its	mystery wonder

常	有	欲	以	觀(观)	其	徼
<i>cháng</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>jiào</i>
eternal normal usual	have possess exist being	desire wish want	by in order to	observe	its	border edge

Some editions (e.g. Huang, 2024) substitute 眇 (*miǎo*, tiny, minute) for 妙 and 徼 (*jiào*, pursue) for 妙. This leads to the idea of the development from minute origins toward the mature things of the present.

Another difficult is whether the character 欲 acts as a noun meaning “desire” or as an adverb casting the following parts of the sentences in the subjunctive as “may observe.” This would make 欲 and 觀 the subjects of the sentences rather than

modifiers of 无. The Fischer translation quoted at the beginning of this essay follows this approach, as do the versions of Yu (2003), Chen et al. (2020) and Wu (2016).

Translators have more commonly considered that these two sentences compare what happens with or without desire (e.g., Addiss & Lombardo;1993; Leguin & Seaton, 1998; Lin, 2020; Liu, 2024; Loy, 1985; Red Pine, 2004; Wilson 2012). This approach fits with the Buddhist idea that one can find release from suffering by relinquishing desire. As pointed out by Watts (1975, p 96), however, the idea that virtue comes from an absence of desire is paradoxical:

Trying to get rid of desire is, surely, desiring not to desire.

If we follow this approach to the translation, we find that Laozi makes no moral judgement about desire: he just points out the differences between having it or not. Both are possible and both serve a purpose. Relinquishing desire can allow the mind a mystical vision of the origin of everything. Exercising desire allows us to understand the nature of the things of the world:

Free from desire, you can realize the mystery;  
Following desire, you can see the manifestations.

However, if the chapter is to be consistent, it is probably best to keep to the duality of *wu* 无(无) and *you* 有:

**Therefore in nothingness you may see the mystery;  
In being you may see the manifestations.**

Nevertheless, the different translations are not that distinct. A person can see the mystery by attuning his or her mind to nothingness. One way of doing this might be to relinquish desire.

## Yin and Yang

The fourth section of the chapter tells us these two states are just different aspects of the universe, part of the union of interacting opposites that makes up the concept of Yin-Yang:

此	兩	者	同	出	而	異(异)	名
<i>cǐ</i>	<i>liǎng</i>	<i>zhě</i>	<i>tóng</i>	<i>chū</i>	<i>ér</i>	<i>yì</i>	<i>míng</i>
this	two	this	same	exit	yet	different	name
these	different	(referring to things)	identical together	out	but	separate	describe

同	謂(谓)	之	玄	玄	之	又	玄
<i>tóng</i>	<i>wèi</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
same	say	of	mystery	mystery	of	again	mystery
identical together	tell name		black deep			also	

Whether these lines refer to (☐) the concepts of being and nothingness or to the states of desire and non-desire depends on how the previous lines were translated. I have opted for the former.

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea  
This is the mystery of mysteries**

## The Gateway

The final section of the chapter proclaims the mystery of the *Dao*:

玄	之	又	玄
<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
mystery dark	of	again	mystery dark

眾(众)	妙	之	門(門)
<i>zhòng</i>	<i>miào</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mén</i>
many multitude	mystery wonder marvel	of	gate door entrance

*Laozi* uses two words for mystery:

□ (*xuán*) is *dark, mysterious, unseen, withdrawn, deep*. But  
 □ (*miào*) is lighter, a wonderful mystery. (Pepper & Wang,  
 2021, p 17)

We can stress the “darkness,” as in Denecke (2010, p 223)

Where the dark is darker than darkness, that’s the Gateway  
 of Subtleties.

Or simply stay with “mystery”

**Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders**

## **Relations to Western Pantheism**

The concept of the Dao has many similarities to Western  
 pantheism, particularly to that proposed by Spinoza (Stamatov,  
 2019, 2025). Fu (1973, p 390) remarks

Both philosophers think that the ultimate way of freeing  
 oneself from human bondage and attaining total emancipation is  
 to have an ontological insight (Lao Tzu) into or intellectual

intuition (Spinoza) of the as-it-is-ness of the world and man.

One significant difference is that Spinoza clearly names the principle underlying the universe as God.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was particularly intrigued by the writings of the Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (1610-1689), a Dominican friar who had spent many years in China and had described the principles of Daoism for Western readers (Murray, 2020). Coleridge and his close colleague William Wordsworth (1770-1850) were responsible for initiating the movement of Romanticism in English literature Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* describes a romantic pantheism that is very similar to the Dao of Laozi:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

## **Envoi**

We can conclude by putting together the complete chapter:

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth  
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

**Therefore through nothingness you can see the mystery;  
Through being you can see the manifestations.**

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea  
This is the mystery of mysteries**

**Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders.**

The character is our introduction to the *Dao*. The character 道 is composed of two radicals. In the upper right is a representation of the head 首 (*shǒu*), and in the left and below is a radical denoting walking 辵 (*chuò*). The combination perhaps represents “to go ahead.” As such it depicts the principle that underlies the universe: the way things should and do turn out.

The *Dao* has several meanings:

In some places the character “*dao* 道” refers to a metaphysical entity understood as ultimate true existence. In other places, it seems to refer to a type of rule or principle, often reflected in natural laws or patterns. In yet other locations, *dao* refers to standards, norms or exemplary models for human life. (Chen et al, 2020, p 2),

Fu (1973) describes six dimensions of the *Dao*:

- (i) reality – a metaphysical symbol of things as they are
- (ii) origin – the source of all there is
- (iii) principle – that whereby all things become what they are
- (iv) function – the laws governing the processes of change
- (v) virtue – that which completes the being of each and every individual
- (vi) technique – the way in which people are governed

The *Dao* in metaphysical terms should be considered in relation to time. As time passes, things change. Our science indicates that such changes are not random but follow general rules. Most people also believe that these changes ultimately progress toward something: that the universe has some purpose and is in the process of becoming better. The *Dao* instantiates

these two ideas. It is the overall principle leading the universe toward harmony. Human beings can live their lives best by attuning themselves to this movement.

The final illustration shows on the right □ written in an ecstatic cursive script by Al Chung-liang Huang for Alan Watt's book on *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975). The fluidity of the calligraphy fits with the idea of water finding its way. On the left is shown the first chapter of the *Daodejing* as created by Lee Chi-Chang for the same book:

道可道非常道 名可名非常名  
無名天地之始有名萬物之母故  
常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀其  
微此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄  
玄之又玄衆妙之門



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