

Tao Te Ching I - Introduction

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Tao is discussed in all of the Three Intricate Books in China. These books are: *Tao Te Ching*, *I Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*. They are called "intricate" because the concepts they discuss originate from a place that is sacred and mysterious. The book *Tao Te Ching* was originally called *Lao Tzu*, the author's name. When people mentioned *Lao Tzu*, they were referring to the book as well as the man. The *Tao Te Ching* is translated as "The Classic of the Way and Virtue." There are a total of eighty-one chapters in the *Tao Te Ching*. The first section is about Tao. The second section is about virtue (or "te"). This is where the "Te" in *Tao Te Ching* is from.

The *Tao Te Ching* is a unique Chinese classic. It is hard for non-Chinese speakers to understand it, and it is difficult for Chinese speakers as well. There are many translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, all in different languages. There are probably over one hundred translations in English alone. The reason that there are so many versions of the *Tao Te Ching* is because few people genuinely understand the meaning behind *Lao Tzu's* words. Every translator thinks that he understands the meaning of the *Tao Te Ching* and publishes his own book. The version of the *Tao Te Ching* that we are going to study is not any particular version; we will be using the original Chinese text. Only through the original text can we understand what *Lao Tzu* really wants to convey. The original version of the *Tao Te Ching* contained no punctuation. When people attempted to translate it, they placed punctuation where they saw fit and thus altered the original meaning of the text. A translator who omitted only one Chinese character from the *Tao Te Ching* text completely changed the meaning of it. For this reason, *Henry Chang* is going to use the original ancient Chinese text of the *Tao Te Ching* to teach this class.

Tao is the source; it is where we come from. Christians say that God is the one who gives us life-*Lao Tzu's* concept of Tao was similar. We do not understand what God really is, but if we want to do something for God or get close to Him, then we have to try to understand Him. It is the same with Tao. We do not understand what Tao really is, but if we want to act in accordance with Tao then we have to try to understand what Tao is. This is the reason that *Lao Tzu* wrote the *Tao Te Ching*. It is a very difficult book for people to understand. However, those who want to do something for Tao will really understand the meaning of the *Tao Te Ching*. The reason why we are reading this right now is because we are all interested in knowing what Tao really is or we are interested in acting in accordance with Tao.

The greatest thinkers were born during the era of 560-300 BC. Their teachings did not come from their life experience or from their studies, but rather they came spontaneously from the source- from Tao. We can learn everything about the physical world around us. But Tao cannot be taught or learned; therefore, this is just an introduction to Tao.

Disciples

Lao Tzu, *Confucius* and *Buddha* were born during the same era, although they lived one hundred years apart from each other. *Lao Tzu* was born the earliest of all these historical figures. Generally, with a person as famous as *Lao Tzu*, we know the dates of their birth and death. It is known approximately when *Lao Tzu* was born, but nobody knows when he died. It is possible that nobody knew where he was when he died, because he was a secretive person. People have speculated that he did not actually die, but that he ascended into heaven like *Jesus* did.

We know the birth and death dates of *Buddha* and *Confucius*. They were both born about 2500 years ago. *Lao Tzu's* way of thinking was very close to that of *Confucius*; they both lived during

the same period of time. Lao Tzu was born in 470 B.C. and died around 395 B.C. Confucius and his disciple Mong Tzu were born about one hundred and fifty years apart from each other. Coincidentally, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were also born one hundred and fifty years apart. It was the same situation with Plato and Aristotle; Plato was born in 427 B.C. and Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. During that period of time, between 560 and 300 B.C., many historical figures were born.

Historical Context

The Tao Te Ching was written at a time when philosophy was blossoming, during what is known as the Axial Period. In the west, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates wrote philosophical classics. In the east, Buddhist and Confucian classics emerged. Thousands of years after the Axial Period, many religious and political figures continued to apply the philosophy of these great writers. For example, Emperor Wen and his heir, Emperor Jing, used the Tao Te Ching as a guideline for ruling China during the Han dynasty. That period is still well-known for its peace and prosperity.

People continue to study these philosophies today and build on them, instead of creating new philosophies. Today's recordable history dates back to 6000 years ago- half of this is 3000, and this is when the Axial Period appeared. If we look at the 600 years, it looks like a hyperbolic curve where the Axial Period is on the peak of the curve. The period before the Axial Period was the period when all the different thoughts were fermenting. As the line leaves the peak and begins to descend, this is when people actually implemented and practiced the theories and philosophies. The period of time when the Tao Te Ching was written was a very unique period for all of human civilization. There is a famous Chinese saying: After long separation, there will be unification. And after long unification, there will be separation. Before Confucius and Lao Tzu came about, Chinese philosophy was quite different and filled with hundreds of different schools of thought.

All of the different schools of thought came together and were unified 3,000 years ago during the Axial Period. Now is another time when thoughts will unify and change. For example, if you look at the past three thousand years in the West, the Christian and Islam cultures emerged. In the East, Buddhist and Confucian cultures emerged. Each culture was specific to a particular region of the world. Today, different schools of thought are merging and new schools of thought are being born. This does not mean that old texts are obsolete; actually, this is a period when a lot of the concepts in the Tao Te Ching will be realized. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu says that the ideal world would be composed of small countries with few citizens. He does not believe that the world should be controlled by a few large countries. Scholars today revisit the Tao Te Ching to learn what Lao Tzu thought an ideal world should be. There is a truth that Lao Tzu is trying to express through the Tao Te Ching. This is not to say that we should regard the Tao Te Ching as the Bible, because Lao Tzu does not prophesize in it. In the Tao Te Ching, we may see facts and thoughts that are foreign to modern society. But we need to look beyond logic and see the underlying truth in life. This is the purpose of our life. In the Tao Te Ching, we can see that Lao Tzu did not accept the cruel facts of life. Specifically, he was against human virtues. These are virtues created by humans, such as mercy and righteousness. The reason that Lao Tzu was against these virtues was because they were created by humans. All rules made by humans lead to chaos, and chaos is fake reality because it cannot last long.

Eras

Approximately every two thousand years there is a new era. Lao Tzu was born at the dawn of an era and now, twenty-five hundred years later, that era is ending. Now we are actually transitioning from one era to another- we are entering the Aquarius period. That is why we have to reevaluate the ideas that have been passed on to us by the great thinkers. Confucius said that we learn new concepts through studying the old ones. It follows that now, in the present day, we have to learn the ideas of these great people before we go in a new direction and acquire new information. Among those teachings, Lao Tzu's was during the year of the harvest.

Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu was a quiet and secluded person, and no one would have known him had he not written the Tao Te Ching. There was no other recorded history of Lao Tzu, and some people thought that there were three Lao Tzus. Lao Tzu is not the founder of the Taoist religion. He believed that there should be no religion associated with Tao, because Tao is connected to the entire universe and does not belong to any religion. Confucius said that Lao Tzu was like a dragon who came and went as he pleased and could not be traced. In Chinese, Lao Tzu is a respectful term meaning "very old man". There is a Taoist folk tale about Lao Tzu's birth that says his hair was gray when he was born. Both he and Buddha were supposedly born from their mother's armpits and said the same thing at their birth: "I am the king of heaven, earth, and everything in between." We can try to understand who Lao Tzu was, but it is difficult since there are not many recordings or many books that explain who Lao Tzu was as a person. Therefore, we are going to try to understand him through the Tao Te Ching.

Chapter One in English

The Tao that can be spoken of
Is not the Everlasting Tao
The name that can be named
Is not the Everlasting name

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and
earth

The named is the mother of ten thousand
things

Therefore, ever desireless
One can observe the hidden mystery;
Ever desiring
One can observe the manifestations.

These two issue from the same origin,
Though named differently.
Both are called the dark.
Dark and even darker,
The door to all hidden mysteries.

Chapter One in Pin Yin

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 jiǎo.

cǐ liǎng zhě, tóng chū èr yì míng.
tóng wèi zhī xuán,

xuán zhī yòu xuán, zhòng miào zhī mèn.

When the first chapter is read in Chinese it sounds like a poem. Even if you do not understand Chinese, you will find natural rhythms that Chinese people feel when they read it. You can find these rhythms if you read it a couple of times aloud. When you read these first three lines of the Tao Te Ching, you can feel your *qi* moving. Each line corresponds to the three major *dan tian*'s (or energy centers) in the body, beginning with the *dan tian* at the top of your head. The words resonate in your body.

The first chapter is an introduction, and its purpose is to describe the concept and structure of Tao. All of the chapters are connected to the first chapter, because it is the foundation of the Tao Te Ching. If you understand chapter one, it will be much easier to understand the remaining chapters. You cannot understand the remaining chapters without understanding chapter one. When you begin reading the other chapters, it will become apparent how well you understand chapter one. Chapter one is inherently difficult to understand since Lao Tzu was trying to explain the unexplainable. Lao Tzu was trying to explain something that was inexpressible with language.

Detailed Explanation of the First Two Lines**1st Line:**

“*Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào*”¹

“The Tao that can be spoken of, is not the Everlasting Tao”

The second *dào* (Tao) is a verb that means “to explain, talk or speak”. At the time that the Tao Te Ching was written, Tao was not used as a verb. To many people, this second “*dào*” does not mean “speak” and can be interpreted otherwise. At the time that the Tao Te Ching was written, Tao did not mean “to speak” in vernacular. Lao Tzu may have been the first to use it as a verb. Because the Tao Te Ching is a classic, it may not subscribe to the rules of syntax. So, let’s look at both interpretations. If we assume that Tao means “to speak” then the line becomes “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao”.

“*Chang*” was sometimes replaced by “*hung*” which means “forever”. Research currently shows that the original word was probably “*hung*”, not “*chang*”. The period mentioned earlier- the *Hang* Dynasty- was when the two emperors who followed the Tao Te Ching managed the country. One of the emperors was *Wu-Ti*, and his family name was *Hung*. In Chinese, “*hung*” and “*chang*” are very similar. If we say “*fēi hung dào*”, it becomes “that it’s not this Emperor’s Tao”, and that’s disrespect to the Emperor. This is why people just changed “*hung*” to “*cháng*”.

Tao (*dào*) in Chinese means “the way” or “the road”. It also implies principle, rule or method. “*Ke*” is “can, able”. Tao is the true meaning of the universe. The first word and the third word of the first chapter are the same, but they have different meanings. The first word is the true meaning of the universe: “*ke dào*”. “*Ke dào*” in Chinese means “something that can be told; something that can be taught.” In the phrase “*ke dào*”, *dào* (Tao) means “instructions”. So, the word “*dào*” is something that one can attempt to explain. The next sentence is “*fēi cháng dào*”. This means that if the word “*dào*” can be explained or can be told, than it is not the true Tao. So if you cannot explain it, then why do you try to teach people? Teaching can be wonderful; it can help us to reach higher levels of understanding. However, it is impossible to verbally communicate the nature of Tao. When humans try to explain very philosophical ideas, our language limits us. Even though we describe Tao as wonderful, Tao is something that is beyond whatever we could possibly describe. It does not matter what words you use to try to explain Tao, there is no way to actually explain it. The Indian fable of the elephant is a good example of the fact that no matter what approach we take to explain Tao, we can never explain to the fullest extent what Tao really is.

“In the fable, there are blind men with an elephant, and each is trying to explain to the others what he thinks is the elephant’s essence. One touches the elephant’s side and exclaims “the elephant is like a wall”. The other touches his trunk and says “it is like a snake.” The other touches his tail and says “no, it is like a rope,” while the other touching his leg says “it is really more like a tree.” Each one of them is accurate, yet limited, in his own description, but this can only be understood by the one who can see the whole elephant.”²

Lao Tzu tried to use the least amount of words to explain what Tao is. He used about five thousand words; he tried to do it the simplest way. Even though Lao Tzu used only five thousand words, people still cannot understand what Tao really is. Therefore, we have to use the Three Intricate Ways (or books) to try to understand the Tao Te Ching. For those who attended the I Ching class, that will help you to understand the Tao Te Ching. Likewise, after you study Tao Te Ching, you can better understand what Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu’s disciple, was trying to say. They

¹ “Tao” with a T is the more historically popular spelling of the Chinese word 道. It comes from the Wade-Giles system of putting Chinese words into a western alphabet. “*Dào*” is the same word, but in pin yin, which is the more modern method of spelling out Chinese words. 道 is actually pronounced “dow.”

² Carpenter, Chad. *Tao and Psychology*. Dragonfly, Issue 2. (2005).

were born one hundred and fifty years apart. Since they were born in the same time period, it was relatively easy for Chuang Tzu to understand what Lao Tzu was trying to teach; versus people like us, who were born twenty-five hundred years later. So the Three Intricate Books of Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, and I Ching are interrelated.

“Tao ke tao, fei chang Tao”. We have never seen Tao, but we try to explain it. This line means that there is something out there, but it is unknown so we do not know what to call it. When you study the Tao Te Ching, you have to use your heart to try to imagine what Tao really is. When we try to understand something that does not have a name and then try to name it, its name will not represent its true nature. For example, you can call someone Ted- but “Ted” is a common name and does not refer to a specific “Ted”. This is an example of the fact that when you try to name something, you are attaching your own meaning to it. The name we give something is limited by our knowledge of it. Because Tao is so difficult to understand, we cannot use our own knowledge and opinions to give it a name. What Lao Tzu is saying here is that even though he calls this thing “Tao”, the word “Tao” does not represent the true Tao.

When we say “Tao”, we have to know that we are referring only to the Tao that we understand from our own perspective- our narrow vision- and not the entire, true “Tao”. We do not understand the real Tao- we only understand a piece of it. This is something that is hard to explain and absorb, but you need to try to understand it. Remember that even if you use the name “Tao”, it does not represent Tao itself. Once you open your heart, you will start to absorb many things that come from the source- from Tao itself.

2nd Line:

“Ming kě míng, fēi cháng míng”

“The name that can be named, Is not the Everlasting name”

“Ming” means “name.” “The name that cannot be named is not the eternal name.” In other words, when you give something a name, the name does not last forever. The way or the path- the Tao- that can be talked about is not the eternal Tao. The eternal Tao cannot be talked about.

“Wu ming” in Chinese means “no name”. That refers to the true, unnamed Tao. It is the Tao that Lao Tzu understood. *“You ming”* is “that which has a name”. In this case, it is naming that which cannot be named- naming the true Tao. When he refers to the nameless Tao, he refers to the original Tao- that which came before everything else. When you give something a name, it does not represent the true thing. Something that has a name is distinct from something without a name. Something without a name is something that existed before all else. The universe originated from the nameless Tao.

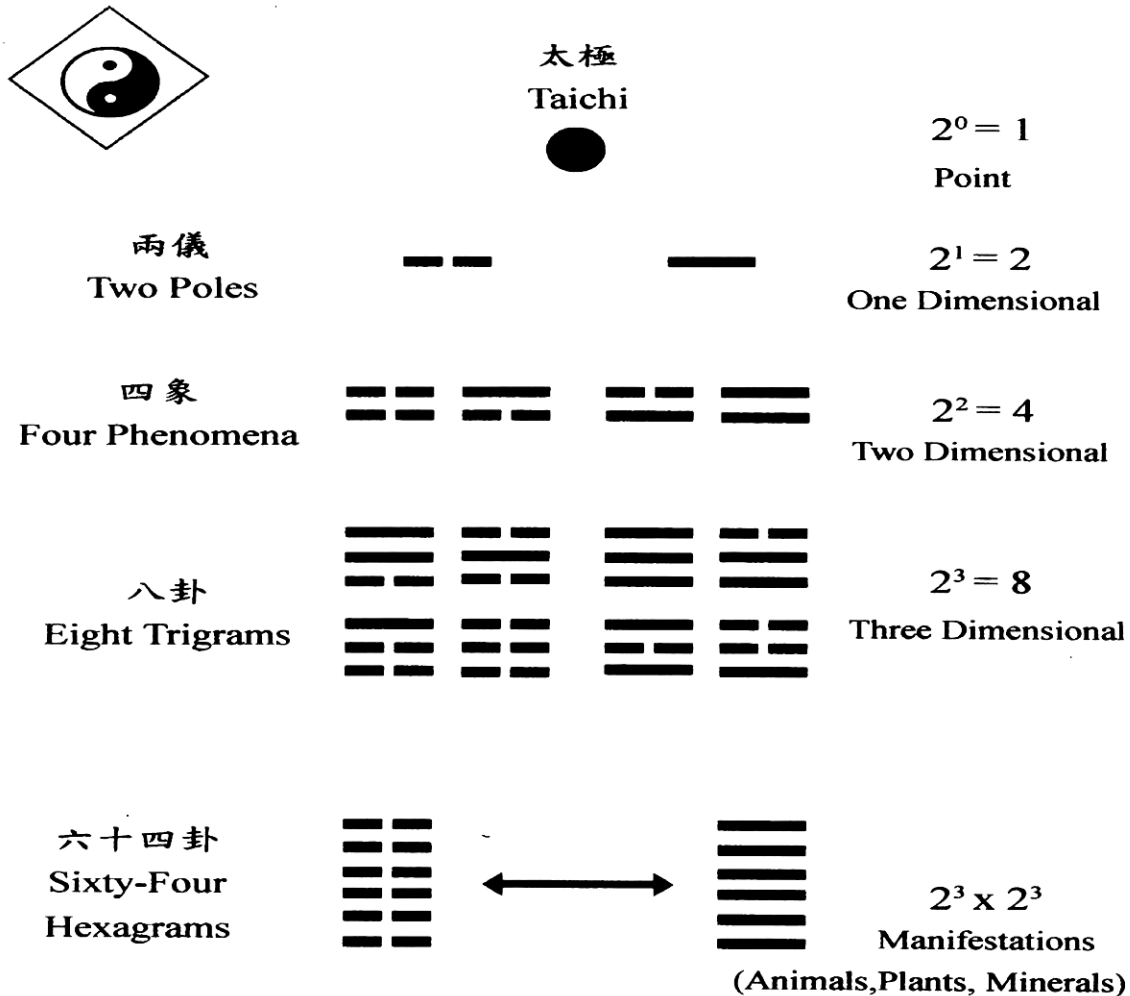


Tao had no name when the universe was first born; it was only given a name when physical life forms emerged. We know that we are very closely related to Tao; everything in this world and this universe is connected to Tao. When you find Tao, you find the source of all life in the universe. *“Wú míng, tiān dì zhī shǐ”* refers to the concept of time. *“Yǒu míng, wàn wù zhī mǔ”* refers to the concept of space. This is how the universe was born- it came about through a union of time and space. In the sentence *“cháng yǒu yù”*, the third word means “desire”. I will use a metaphor to explain what desire means in this sentence. When we watch television with no purpose, we do not care what is being shown. However, when we watch a particular program

with a purpose, we try to analyze it and learn what it is about. Through this analysis, we come to understand the true meaning of the program. Some people act with a purpose (or desire) and others do not; both are acceptable.

I Ching

Why does Lao Tzu say that the eternal Tao cannot be talked about? Because Lao Tzu knows that Tao is an ever-changing thing. The moment you try to describe Tao, it transforms and your description is no longer accurate. This coincides with the philosophy of the *I Ching*, or the Book of Change. The structure of Tao is visually represented on the *I Ching* chart. We cannot define Tao, but on the *I Ching* chart, Tao is symbolized by the *Tai Chi* (or yin yang) symbol. In this symbolic structure, Tao equals one yin and one yang. Yin and yang change as well. This may seem very vague, but from this sentence we know that Tao is an ever-changing thing. "Ming" means name. When you try to understand something, you are able to label it. For example, when you talk about one of your friends, you mention his name and this means that you know who he is. If you know nothing about something you cannot give it a name. For example, if you do not understand Tao you cannot call it "Tao". When you refer to something as "Tao" it means that you understand what Tao is. However, Lao Tzu said that whatever you understand as "Tao" is not the true Tao. So, Tao's current name is not its real name.



At the level of Tai Chi, yin and yang had not begun working- this is the level of the nameless Tao. When yin and yang separate, they become the nameable Tao. "Tao ke Tao" and "ming ke ming"

(the first two lines) are trying to tell us that Tao is very hard to understand and describe. We do not understand Tao from these two sentences, but we now understand that Tao is a very difficult concept to grasp. Again, when you give something a name it implies that you understand it. So the Tao that does not have a name is different from the Tao which we have named. "*Wu ming*" or "no name" is the unnamed Tao that was present at the beginning of heaven and earth. When people speak of the named and unnamed Tao, they are referring to the same thing, but they are Taos from two different locations and time periods. For example, before a girl is married she is a person. After she gets married she is still a person. After she gives birth to her children, she is still a person but in all these three stages her role is different. In the last stage, she is a mother. We can apply this analogy when discussing the nameless and named Tao. The nameless Tao is like the woman before she became a mother. When she becomes a mother, "mother" is her name because her role is different. We know there are some differences between girl and mother- this is like Tao with a name and Tao without a name. Now, when a girl becomes a mother, we cannot see her as a girl again because it is too late. The Tao we know is the Tao that is the mother. It is hard to imagine what Tao was like before it became the mother of everything. That is why Lao Tzu said it cannot be described. Lao Tzu, like us, was created by Tao and so it is impossible for him to understand what Tao was like before he was born. We can see that Lao Tzu is very honest. If he claimed that he knew what Tao was like before heaven and earth came to be, he would have been lying.

There are eighty-one chapters in Tao Te Ching and we cannot possibly know what Lao Tzu was talking about through the first chapter alone. There are many concepts that describe different aspects of Tao throughout the Tao Te Ching. This chapter helps us to conceptualize Tao. When we study the Tao Te Ching, we should not think that we understand it. We can only say that we know why Lao Tzu says something- we cannot say that we really know Tao. Then we will begin to understand Tao.

To be continued...



Photos by Jacqui Depas
