

# Tao Te Ching I - Introduction

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Photo by Susanne Kikuta

Now let us look at the second half of Chapter One, which is different from the first half. “Chang” means everlasting. What is true is everlasting. Now look at the line “wu you yi”. “Yi” is a desire to do something. This means being without a desire or without a thought. To observe or see its mystery: its wonder. “Miao” in Chinese is used to describe a principle. In Chinese, people will use the word “miao” to describe songs. “Miao” means “beautiful” or “wondrous”. It was used to describe a certain kind of philosophy. We know that when we describe some theories, there are five different layers. The first layer is “chu”, meaning “broad” or “rough”. “Tse” is “elaborate” or “eloquent”. “Wei” is “micro” or “delicate”. “Chuen” is “myserious” on a broad level. “Miao” is when you cannot describe its status. There is an idiom in Chinese, which is: “some things are so wonderful they cannot be described.” When Lao Tzu said “guān qí miào” he was talking about observing the wonder of Tao. The level of wonder is the level where a person is completely united with their environment or with heaven. In Buddhism terms, it is deep meditation. “Guan” does not just mean “see” or “observe”. It actually means “thinking with your heart/mind”. If you can see something, then obviously you can observe it and think about it. However, if you cannot see something, you must imagine it. In Buddhism, it is called “yuan shang” which means: observe and think. If you can observe it, then observe it. If you cannot observe it, then you must meditate, contemplate and imagine it. It is wondrous that if you contemplate long enough, then eventually you will see it. When you are able to see something that cannot really be seen- that is wondrous. The only criterion for this is that we do this without thinking about it. In other words, we do not strive to see something. For example, you

do not understand Tao and you do not know Tao, so when you actually see it, it is wonderful. In Buddhism today, many Buddhists try to meditate on Buddha’s image. Then, because they have a preconceived image, what they see in their minds is not the real Buddha. What they experience is merely the visualization of an image of Buddha and not a connection with his divine presence. Wonder, however, comes from true realizations. Lao Tzu says that when you try to understand something difficult, you must do so without thought and desire.

“Chang” means “truly”. “Cháng yǒu yù yǐ again, is “without thought” or “without mind”. This means that we do something without assumptions or predilection. “Yǒu yù yǐ” is to be concentrated. Confucius said that “chang” is being honest with yourself. When you are honest with yourself, you see what you already know. You can see its delicate structure, because you already know it. You can research it or study it. One method is to research or study with a purpose, or intention. The other method is to research or observe a particular philosophy without thought. These are two methods that we always use in our lives. The first one is truly without assumption- without mind. The other is truly intentional and concentrated. Both have their results: the first one is to understand a wondrous idea or philosophy. The other is to understand its intricate structure. We can use our body as a metaphor for these two things. Our brain can think. Our brain can think, but we cannot analyze our thoughts by dissecting the brain physically. On the other hand, if you try to understand a computer you can break it into different parts and study its internal structure. We can dissect our body into different parts and learn their structure, but only on the physical level. Our thoughts- our energy- cannot be understood in this manner. Lao Tzu thinks that we need both the physical and spiritual level in order to understand something. Lao Tzu used these two different sentences to describe two different aspects of our lives because they are equally important. “Cǐ liǎng zhě” is “these two things”. The two things are the wonder and the structure: the wonder of ideas, the structure of physical things. In addition, the wonder is that we see through having no thought and the structure is that we see through full intention. They spring from the same source, but they bear different names. One is “miao”; the other is “jiao”. They both mean “mystery”. Chuang Tzu is a Taoist philosopher who lived after Lao Tzu did. He illustrated “jiao”, or using total concentration and honesty to understand the structure of something. In one of his chapters, he said that when he was looking at a fish he was actually united with it. That is how he knew what the fish was thinking. He became the fish. That is the ultimate level of “jiào”- of understanding the structure of things. If we look at the difference between “jiào” and “miào”, “miào” is the level when you unite with the macro universe. “Jiào” is when you unite with things

you are researching or meditating on. One is holistic; the other is specific.

“Xuán” is something so mysterious that it is indescribable. When you are not in a particular dimension, you do not understand the ideas that come from it. The reason the level of “xuan” is hard to understand is because its theory does not come not from the human world- it is from the different dimension. This is why it is hard for us to use our brains to understand it. “Miao” and “jiao” are both mysterious and profound. For example, the structure of our body is mysterious. Even the structure of a little bird’s body is intricate and hard to understand. The physical level is mysterious and the idea level is even more mysterious. This sounds meaningless, but it is the most profound aspect of Tao. It is actually the origin and the reason for everything coming to life. When these two profound things combine, they become the door, or gate, to many wonders. There will be things outside of the door, or the gate. However, everything comes from the gate and this is why it is called “the gate of many wonders”. There is a chapter in the Tao Te Ching that discusses “the door of the profound mother”, which we will cover in later classes. An example of the gate is when a man (yang) and a woman (yin) come together



with true intention and utmost honesty. They create something new: a child. Everything in the universe is virtuous because they come from this harmony and total honesty. Anything created with fake intention or pretense cannot last

long. In our lives, when we do not create something out of total honesty it cannot last long. It is like when we see something temporarily or bump into something: it is not our true intention.

### Summarization of Chapter One

“The Tao which can be talked about is not the eternal Tao”. Here, Lao Tzu is trying to express the highest level of Tao- the Tao that existed before the birth of heaven and earth. The mystery of this level of Tao is that everything was created from nothing. The Tao that has a name is not the name of the eternal, original Tao. The named Tao is the Tao that can be recognized by limited human minds. We use the analogy that the nameless Tao is like a girl before she becomes a mother. If you did not know her before she was a mother, than you only know her as a mother and not as a girl. Your understanding of this person does not include her life before she was a mother. The Tao that we can study is the Tao that we can recognize- we cannot trace it back to



Photo by Peter Brooker

the origin. Lao Tzu always told us to revert to our heavenly decree (i.e. our nature). Only when we revert to our nature can we find something that was previously unknown. That part of your life is the most important part- because if that part is right, everything in your life will be right. If that part is wrong, then everything that follows it will be wrong. It is the part that we must know and we should know, but it is the hardest to understand. The nameless Tao existed during the potential of the beginning of heaven and earth. When Tao has a name, it functions as the mother of everything.

You need to be truly desire-less to see the holistic Tao. In order to do so, you do not try to know any piece of Tao. Through that, you are able to understand Tao from a holistic point of view. In *Da Xue (The Great Learning)*- another Confucian classic- Confucius said that this is how we can understand bright virtue. When we are desire-less, we can observe the wonder: the bright virtue of Tao. If we learn something in a focused and intentional manner, we can observe its mechanism or structure. This is what Confucius was referring to when he discussed “understanding” or “knowing” something. When you study it you only know part of it. You cannot possibly know the structure of the whole universe- you can only know what is related to you. It is not necessary to understand every little detail; you only need to know what relates to you. What relates to you will pique your interest and you will have the intention to understand it.

We understand both levels of “yǒu yù yǐ” (with intention) and “wú yù yǐ” (without desire). In our life, both are applicable. Obviously when we are living our everyday life, we cannot always be without desires or without thought. It would not be practical. Therefore, we should use either one depending on the situation in our life. The “wú yù yǐ” or “yǒu yù yǐ” is a theory of function and does not mean that

new things are always being generated. The difference between “yǒu yù yǐ” and “wú yù yǐ” was clarified above. This is because various religious or spiritual practices emphasize the virtue of non-desire or non-thought. We need to transcend our thoughts and desires to truly understand philosophy and the universe as a whole. However, in our everyday life, we deal with the micro universe and with our own affairs. Therefore, we need to use our brain. To practice Tao is not merely to rid yourself of all thoughts. There are actually more occasions when you would use your true intention instead

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of non-desire. That’s a very common mistake for spiritual practitioners. For example, you are studying the Tao Te Ching right now because you have a desire to understand it. Desire can help us to understand things and ideas in the world. Other spiritual practitioners worship the value of no-thought. Therefore, many do not try to practice or learn anything. They do not read classics such as the Bible, Buddhism scriptures, or Taoist scriptures. They just meditate or try to rid themselves of all thought. The only reason we try to have no thought is to understand the universe, but how often do you want to understand the universe in your everyday life? The majority of the time you are dealing with your everyday life, so be careful not to go to the extreme.



### Being True

These two ideas are very important guidelines for our everyday life. The key point is “chang”, or that which is everlasting and true. For example, if you needed to research something for your job, but you only did it because you knew it would earn you a higher salary, you would be researching the subject in an unfocused manner. In this case, you are not truly intentional because you are focused on earning more money and not on the subject that you are learning. It is also the same for the first part, which is “truly desire-less.” If you desire to be desire-less, than you are not really desire-less. If you sit there with no purpose but to become a Buddha or to realize Tao, then you still have desire. This is not truly desire-less and you are not able to see the wonder of Tao. If you are not truly intentional, you cannot see the true structure of something. The mind does not come from the highest source-it comes from the physical level. This is different from what Lao Tzu was discussing. “Miao”, or wonder, and “jiao”, or structure, both come from the idea of Tao. “Miao” and “jiao” are two different levels of mystery: the macro universe and the micro universe. The macro universe is the whole universe; the micro universe is our body or our person. In the I Ching, the macro universe is yang and the micro universe is yin. When you separate the universe into macro and micro, you can see their differences. The reason you want to compare them is to understand both of

their functions. The interaction of the micro universe and the macro universe will create a gate, or a door. Lao Tzu called this, “the door to all wonders”. This is where yin and yang merge harmoniously. This is also called the Middle Way, or the Central Way in Confucianism. When yin and yang merge, they create something new. This is the process of renewal generated by the universe. The purpose of Tao is to continuously renew. For example, people want their future generations to be better than the current generation. They look to create a future that is better than the present. This is also the

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purpose of Tao. In the I Ching, it says that birth is the theory of “I”. Or create and create: every creation is a renewal. It is the purpose of Tao. People sometimes use the *Tao Te Ching* to meditate. Since “wu” means no desire, people try to empty themselves of desire when they meditate. If someone is trying to accomplish a purpose while meditating, then they are not truly meditating. Lao Tzu tried to teach about Tao, not about meditation. When you look at the universe without any intention or focus, you get the chance to see all of the wonderful living beings in it. But when you concentrate and try to look for something specific then you will miss out on the big picture. As follows, there are two Taos: the true Tao (unnamed) and the Tao that we understand (named). To most Christians, Tao means God.

What God thinks is very important, but what we think is also very important. The true Tao is something that we do not understand; only God knows what it is. The named Tao is what humans understand; what Lao Tzu was thinking may have been different from what God was thinking. However, it does not matter because the *Tao Te Ching* is still very important.

Both the named and unnamed Tao come from the same source; the difference is that one is named and the other is unnamed. We call the true Tao "Tao" but the true Tao is natural. We think that we have Tao inside of ourselves—that Tao is ours. However, the true Tao belongs to no one and has no name. Lao Tzu also has Tao inside of himself, but that Tao is nameless. Both of the Tao in ourselves and the Tao in Lao Tzu came from the same source. The Tao in ourselves and the Tao in Lao Tzu are both very intricate and

### Question and Answer Session

1. Q: What does miao mean?

A: Miao means "intricate", "wondrous" or "mysterious". It is hard to explain.

2. Q: Do Zen and Tao mean the same thing?

A: Different religions will try to use different words to try to explain what Tao is. The main purpose of different religious terms is to explain what Tao is; however, none of these terms fully explain what Tao is.

3. Q: A Zen master says, "I truly understand what Tao is." Is the Tao that he understands the true Tao?

A: No, the Tao he understands is actually the Tao within himself. He sees it from his perspective. Buddha said he



infinite. Each individual has their own distinct and intricate Tao inside of them; however, all of these personal Taos come from the same source. This chapter discusses both the universal and personal Tao. Tao is forever changing, so there is no way we can fully capture it. Therefore, the Tao that Lao Tzu tried to teach about may not be the same Tao that exists today. Tao keeps changing; when your heart changes, the Tao inside you will change. This is why it is very hard to give Tao a name, because you are not talking about a fixed or constant thing. It is very hard to describe what Tao is, and Master Chang is not able to clearly explain to you what Tao is. The first chapter is merely a general explanation of Tao and covers the major concepts of Tao. The Tao that Master Chang is teaching about will be a little different from the Tao that Lao Tzu taught about. The Tao in Master Chang and the Tao in Lao Tzu are different. Chapter one is the key to understanding Tao; if you understand this then you do not need to keep studying.

understood Tao; however, he understood the Tao within himself. When humans understand Tao, we understand the Tao within ourselves, not the true Tao. Tao does not belong to anyone or any place; Tao is natural. It doesn't matter where you go, it will always be there. No one can claim ownership of it. Taoism, the religion, was not founded by Lao Tzu. He did not believe that there should be any religion associated with Tao. Tao is connected to the entire universe and it does not belong to any religion. Tao can be used by anybody, but it does not belong to anyone. It is just like air; everyone can breathe the air, but no one can claim ownership of the air.

When Master Chang explains the words, we have to think and try to understand for ourselves what Lao Tzu was trying to say. We can look at the first sentence and think about what Lao Tzu was trying to explain to us. When we read the verses, it is important that we do not take the words at face value, but that we try to think about the deeper



meaning. Tao is so important because it is connected to all the life forms- it's related to the whole universe. Nobody can say, "Tao has nothing to do with me. Why should I try to understand it?" because actually, Tao has everything to do with us. That is why we need to think about what Lao Tzu was trying to teach us. If you read the first sentence and do not understand what Lao Tzu was trying to say, then you may think it is nonsense and is irrelevant. But it is very relevant to each of us.

5. Q: If the English translation is 98% accurate, what about

the 2% that is inaccurate? Will Master Chang be able to accurately transmit the meaning to us?

A: Master Chang is also trying to translate the ancient script, so what he says may not be 100% accurate either. That is why he encourages people to ask questions and state disagreements so that everyone can discuss their own perspective.

6. Q: I was wondering if we should we know Tao by understanding Lao Tzu or by cultivating Tao and connecting with our hearts? I found that by cultivating Tao and having the experience of Tao, that's when I gain the most understanding. So I feel that even if the translation is perfect- even if Lao Tzu himself explains it to you- unless you experience Tao through cultivation, it doesn't matter that you intellectually understand the words. I find that through my experience cultivating Tao, I can go back to Lao Tzu's words every couple of months and have a greater understanding of them. This is not because I study them, but because I use my own experience to understand them.

A: Everybody has Tao within themselves, and everybody's personal Tao is different. But the Tao within Lao Tzu is the original Tao. So, when you cultivate Tao you experience the Tao within yourself, but you also need to learn about the Tao described by Lao Tzu. You need to learn about the Tao explained by Lao Tzu and see if that is the right path for you to follow. If it is the right path, then you should continue cultivating Tao. If the Tao described by Lao Tzu does not seem right to you, then you should back off and try to find another path.

Q: So, Lao Tzu kind of validates our own practice?

A: Yes.

7. Q: I do not understand the sentence about desire versus no desire. What does it mean?

A: Desire as it is used here is not the common use of the word. In this context, desire means having a purpose in mind. Desire is having an objective; no desire is lacking an objective or purpose. If you look at something with no goal in mind- no desire- then you will see the wonder of the entire universe (the big picture). But if you focus and try to learn something with goals or objectives in mind, then you will learn in more detail. For example, when you cultivate Tao you learn about Tao itself in more detail. □