Tao Te Ching Study Guide

Tao Te Ching by Stephen Mitchell

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The TAO TE CHING by Lao-tzu is a classic work of Chinese philosophy that talks about the art of living, embracing an inscrutable, eternal Way (Tao). Stephen Mitchell presents it in a free translation, with endnotes that offer literal translations in some cases, short commentaries, and examples.

TAO TE CHING (pronounced roughly: Dow Deh Jing) is a classical work of Chinese philosophy dating from the time of Confucius (551-479 BCE), authored by Lao-tzu, whose name means "The Old Master" or "The Old Boy." It talks about the art of living with humor, grace, large-heartedness, and deep wisdom. Translator Stephen Mitchell aims to provide in English the effect that Lao-tzu would have had on an ancient Chinese reader. Whenever he feels his "improvisations" are too radical, he provides the literal text in endnotes.

From the outset, the book differentiates a path that can be expressed (lower-case tao) from the inscrutable, eternal Way (upper-case Tao). The Tao cannot be perceived. Through a variety of figures of speech, the Tao is shown to be inexhaustible, older than God, birthing both good and evil, never born, never dying, desiring nothing, and present for all. All things are born from the Tao, but it creates nothing. The Tao flows everywhere and in all things. Every being is an expression of the Tao and spontaneously honors it. The Tao's love is the nature of things. The Tao is the center of the universe. The Tao's net covers the universe and nothing slips through. In the end, all things flow back to the Tao.

When they hear of the Tao, superior people embody it instantly; average people half-believe and half-doubt, and fools laugh. Every day one adds a bit of knowledge and drops a bit of the Tao. Doing nothing and reaching non-action allows the Tao to act. Those planted in and embracing the Tao cannot be moved; they are genuine; their families flourish; their country is an example for others, and the universe sings. One can be oneself only by living the Tao. When one opens oneself to the Tao and embodies it completely, one sees everything fall into place. The Tao works but claims nothing, nourishes but does not hold on, merges with all things and hides humbly. It is great because all things vanish into it and it endures, but it is not aware of its greatness, making it truly great. The Tao gives itself up and thus endures. Those who control by force oppose the Tao, taking from those who lack and giving to those who have too much.

The Master embodies the Tao and his/her actions and non-actions are held up as supreme examples of living in the Tao. S/he does not teach but does and by example and non-interference helps others embrace the Tao.

Text

Text Summary and Analysis

TAO TE CHING consists of 81 numbered chapters of varying lengths. The translated text is set as free verse broken into two, three, or four stanzas. It is followed by Stephen Mitchell's notes and commentaries, chapter-by-chapter. The book is a series of aphorisms and scenarios with little apparent larger structure. Because attempting to integrate text and notes creates undue confusion, this study guide divides them as does the original.

1. The Tao cannot be both named and is eternal. Desire separates mystery and manifestations, but both are rooted in darkness, from which comes understanding. 2. Beauty and goodness cause ugliness and bad to be seen. Being/non-being, difficult/easy, long/short, high/low, and before/after are each connected. The Master acts and teaches without doing or speaking, lets things happen, knows when to let go, neither possesses nor expects, and, forgetting her work when it is done, sees it last forever. 3. Overrating men and possessions causes weakness and stealing. The Master leads by empowering minds, weakening ambition, and toughening resolve. Loss creates confusion in those who think they know. "Not-doing" makes things fall into place. 4. Tao is "like a well, used but never used up, hidden but present" and older than God. 5. Rather than take sides Tao gives birth to good and evil; the Master welcomes sinners and saints. The more one uses the infinite Tao, the more it produces, and the more one talks of it, the less one understands. One must hold to the center.

6. The Tao is called the "Great Mother," empty, inexhaustible, birthing worlds, present within to use however one wants. 7. The Tao is infinite and eternal - never born, never dying, desiring nothing for itself and present for all. Staying behind, the Master is ahead, detached yet one with all things, and perfectly fulfilled. 8. Like water, the supreme good nourishes without trying, and like the Tao, stays in low places that people avoid. People should live close to the ground, think simply, be fair, try not to control, enjoy their work, and be completely present in family life. One receives respect by not comparing or competing. 9. A filled bowl spills; an over-sharpened knife blunts; chasing money and security are bad for the heart, and seeking approval makes one a prisoner. Work, step back, and find serenity. 10. Can one's mind be return to the original oneness or one's body be supple like a newborn, or one's inner vision cleansed to sees only light, or people be loved and led without imposed will? Can events take their course when dealing with vital matters? Can one step back and understand all things? Virtue is giving birth, nourishing, having without possessing, acting without expectation, and leading without taking control.

11. Though people make wheels, pots, and houses, it is the space within that functions. People work with being but use non-being. 12. Colors, sounds, flavors, thoughts, and desires negatively affect the senses. The Master observes the world but trusts inner vision and allows everything with an open heart. 13. Success and failure are equally

dangerous because only standing on the ground assures balance; climbing up and down a ladder is shaky; hope is as hollow as fear because they are both phantoms that arise from thinking of one's unseeable self. One must see and love the world as one's self and have faith in the way things are. 14. Looking, listening, and reaching wisdom are impossible, but one can be wisdom, at ease in one's life. Realizing where one comes from is wisdom. 15. Only the appearance of the profound, subtle, wise ancient masters is describable: careful, alert, courteous, fluid, shapable, receptive, and clear. One must wait for mud to settle and for the right time to take action. The Master neither seeks nor expects fulfillment but is always present and welcoming.

16. One must empty the mind, find peace of heart, and watch others' turmoil, but contemplate their return. Every being returns to the common source. Not realizing that the source is security causes confusion and sorrow. Realizing it brings tolerance, disinterest, amusement, kindness, and dignity. In the Tao one is able to deal with anything in life and is ready for death. 17. When the Master governs, people are not aware she exists. After the Master, leaders rate as loved, feared, and despised. Untrusted people are not trustworthy. The Master acts rather than talks and people are amazed at what the Master accomplishes. 18. Goodness and piety appear when the Tao is forgotten; cleverness and knowledge appear when intelligence declines; filial piety when families have no peace, and patriotism when countries fall to chaos. 19. Without holiness and wisdom, people are happier; without morality and justice, they do right; without industry and profit, there are no thieves. It is best to stay in the center of the circle and let things take their course. 20. Not thinking ends problems. Neither yes/no nor success/failure mean anything. It is ridiculous to imitate others. Lao-tzu declares that he is expressionless, possesses nothing, has an empty mind, is dark, dull, alone, and aimless but drinks from the Great Mother's breasts.

21. The Master shines because she is always one with the unfathomable Tao, beyond "is and is not." Lao-tzu sees this by looking inside. 22. Wholeness, straightness, fullness, rebirth, and receiving everything come from seeking their opposites. The Master residing in the Tao sets an example: by not displaying herself, proving nothing, not knowing herself, and not setting goals, she shines, is trusted, is recognized, and succeeds. One can be oneself only by living the Tao. 23. Like the forces of nature, one should express oneself completely and then keep quiet. When one opens oneself to the Tao, one is one with the Tao, embodying it completely: just as with insight and loss. When open to the Tao and trusting one's natural responses, one sees everything fall into place. 24. Standing on tiptoes, rushing ahead, trying to shine, defining oneself, taking power over others, and clinging to one's work are all self-defeating. One should do one's job and go in order to be in accord with the Tao. 25. The Tao is mother of the universe: formless, perfect, serene, perfect, solitary, unchanging, infinite, always-present, always flowing and returning to the origin of things. The Tao, the universe, the Earth, and Man are the four great powers, and each follows from the one preceding it.

26. Heavy is the root of light and unmoved the source of movement. The Master travels without leaving home and is always serene, while Lords flit foolishly about, losing touch with who they are. 27. As good travelers, artists, and scientists are all open, so the Master is available to all, rejecting no one, using all situations, and wasting nothing. This

is "embodying the light." A good man is a bad man's teacher and a bad man a good man's job. (In his notes, Mitchell declares this one of the book's most important chapters. See below.) 28. One should know the male, white, and the personal, but keep to the female, black, and impersonal, to be received and enabled by the Tao. The world is "formed from the void like utensils from a block of wood"; the Master knows the utensils but keeps the block to use all things.

29. Lao-tzu doubts the world can be improved, for it is is sacred. Tampering risks ruining it; treating it as an object risks losing it. There are times for being ahead, behind, in motion, at rest, vigorous, exhausted, safe, and in danger. The Master sees how things are, exerts no control and resides at the center of the circle. 30. When governing by the Tao, one must not force issues or resort to war, for force always brings a counter force. The Master does her job and stops, knowing the universe cannot be controlled or events dominated against the Tao's current. Believing in herself, the Master does not convince or seek approval; accepting herself, she is accepted by the world.

31. Decent men detest and avoid weapons as tools of war and fear. If compelled to use them, they show restraint and seek peace. If one must fight, one should view the enemy not as demons but as fellow human beings, wish no personal harm, and not rejoice in victory and slaughter. One should enter battle gravely, like a funeral. 32. The Tao cannot be perceived. It is smaller than an electron but holds galaxies. If the powerful were centered in the Tao, there would be harmony, paradise, peace, and law in the heart. Names, forms, and institutions end. Knowing when to stop avoids danger. "All things end in the Tao as rivers flow into the sea." 33. Knowing others is intelligence but knowing oneself is wisdom; mastering others is strength but mastering oneself is power. Realizing one has enough shows that one is rich. If one stays in the center and embraces death, one endures forever. 34. The great Tao flows everywhere. Although all things are born from it, it creates nothing. It works but claims nothing, nourishes but does not hold on, merges with all things, and hides humbly. It is great because all things vanish into it and yet it endures, unaware of its greatness - making it truly great. 35. Being centered in the Tao, one can safely go anywhere, peacefully perceiving universal harmony despite pain. Music and good cooking make people stop and enjoy, but words pointing to the Tao seem monotonous and unremarkable. They are inexhaustible when put to use.

36. One must give freedom to whatever one wants to shirk, get rid of, or take, accepting the way things are. Soft/slow overcome hard/fast. One must leave how one works a mystery and merely show the results. 37. The Tao does nothing but through it, all things are done. If the powerful were centered on the Tao, the world would be transformed; people would be content, harmonious, and free of desire. Without desire, there is peace. 38. Not trying to be powerful, the Master is truly powerful, while ordinary people never stop grasping for power. The Master does nothing, yet leaves nothing undone, while ordinary, kind, and just people do constantly and get nothing done. Moral people use force when no one responds. Loss of the Tao leaves goodness, whose loss leaves morality, whose loss leaves ritual, the "husk of faith" and beginning of chaos. The Master looks deeply and dwells in reality. 39. In harmony with the Tao, the sky, the earth, and all creatures are as they should be, content and endlessly renewing. When

humans interfere with the Tao, the sky and earth are ruined; equilibrium crumbles, and creatures go extinct. The Master is compassionate about the parts because she understands the whole. She practices humility and lets the Tao shape her like a stone. 40. Returning and yielding mark the Tao. All things are born of being, which is born of non-being.

41. When they hear of the Tao, superior people embody it instantly; average people half-believe, and fools laugh. If they failed to laugh, it would not be the Tao. Paths seem to go the opposite way. Power, purity, steadfastness, and clarity all seem their opposites. Art seems unsophisticated, love indifferent, and wisdom childish. The Tao is found nowhere but nourishes and completes all. 42. The Tao births One, which births Two, which births Three, which births all. All things have their backs to the female and face the male. The combination is harmony. Ordinary people hate solitude, but the Master uses it, realizing she is one with the universe. (This is the yin/yang and chi, arguably the most familiar part of the Tao to Westerners. See the note to Chapter 42 below). 43. The gentlest overcomes the hardest and "no substance" enters "no space," showing the value of "non-action." The Master teaches without words and performs without actions. 44. How do fame/integrity, money/happiness, and success/failure compare for importance, value, and destructiveness? Looking to others for fulfillment does not fulfill. Depending on others brings no inner happiness. One must be content with what one has and rejoice in how things are. Lacking nothing, one has the world. 45. Perfection seems imperfect and fullness empty, but they are not. Straightness seems crooked, wisdom foolish, and art artless. The Master lets this happen, lets the Tao speak for itself.

46. A country in harmony with Tao makes trucks and tractors not warheads. Fear is the greatest illusion, preparing to defend oneself the greatest wrong, and having an enemy the greatest misfortune. One who sees through fear is safe. 47. One can open one's heart to the world without opening one's door and see the essence of the Tao without opening a window. The more one knows, the less one understands. The Master arrives without leaving, sees light without looking, and achieves without doing. 48. Every day one adds a bit of knowledge and drops a bit of the Tao, doing less until one reaches non-action. Doing nothing leaves nothing undone. Mastery means letting things go their own way without interfering. 49. The Master has no mind of her own but works with the mind of the people, being good with the good and the bad, for that is true goodness. The Master trusts the trustworthy and the untrustworthy, for that is trust. People do not understand the Master, but she treats them like her children.

50. The Master gives herself up to the moment without illusions or resistance. The Master does not think about actions but lets them flow from the core, holds nothing back, and is ready for death as at the end of a hard day's work. 51. Every being is an expression of the Tao, coming into existence perfect and being completed by circumstances. All things spontaneously honor the Tao. The Tao creates without possessing, acts without expecting, guides without interfering. The Tao's love is the nature of things. 52. In the beginning is the Tao. Everything issues from it and returns to it. One finds origins by tracing back manifestations, as one finds the mother from the children. Keeping the mind free from judgment brings peace. Darkness holds clarity and

yields strength. When one uses one's light and returns to the source of light, one "practices eternity." 53. Although the Tao is easy, people prefer side paths. Signs of not keeping with the Tao are speculators prospering, farmers losing land, officials funding weapons not cures, an extravagant and irresponsible upper class, and hopeless poor. 54. Those planted by and embracing the Tao are unmovable and remembered forever. With the Tao, one is genuine, one's family flourishes, one's country is an example for others, and the universe sings. Lao-tzu knows this by looking inside himself. 55. In harmony with the Tao, one is like a newborn, soft and weak but having a powerful grip. The newborn knows nothing of sex but has erections, screams all day without getting hoarse, for its harmony is complete. The Master's power is the same: letting things come and go without effort or desire, never expecting, never disappointed, never growing only in spirit. 56. "Those who know do not talk and those who talk do not know." One should seek the primal identity by controlling the senses and become like the Tao - incapable of approach, withdrawal, benefits, harm, honor, or disgrace. By giving itself up, the Tao endures.

Chapter 57-62 all relate to principles of good government. This is a rare clumping of like material in the TAO TE CHING. 57. A great leader must follow the Tao by not planning or controlling but letting the world govern itself. Prohibitions inhibit virtue; weapons build insecurity; subsidies kill self-reliance. The Master lets go of law so people can be honest, of economics so they prosper, of religion so they are serene, and of all desire for the common good in order that the good becomes as common as grass. 58. Tolerant government makes for comfort and honesty, while repression causes depression and craftiness. When those in charge desire power, the higher the ideals the lower the results. Trying to make people happy results in misery; trying to make them moral produces vice. The Master serves as an example not imposing her will, being pointed without piercing, straightforward, supple, radiant, and "easy on the eyes." 59. Moderation is best when governing a country. This comes from gaining freedom from one's own ideas, tolerance, firmness, suppleness, and openness. Nothing is impossible to one who has let go. This allows maternal care for the people. 60. Poking too much spoils a government as much as it does when frying a small fish. If a country is centered on the Tao, evil has no power; it is not there because one can step out of its way. When evil has nothing to oppose it disappears. 61. Powerful countries are like the sea to which all streams flow. Power requires humility, which means trusting the Tao and not needing to be defensive. When a great nation, like a great person, makes a mistake, it must realize, admit, and correct it. Those who point out faults are benevolent teachers. Enemies are shadows the ruler casts. A nation centered on the Tao nourishes its own people and does not meddle in others' affairs. It becomes a light to all nations. 62. The Tao is the center of the universe - treasure to the good and refuge for the bad. Honors can be bought with words, but respect needs good deeds. The Tao is beyond value and no one can achieve it. New leaders do not need others' expertise but to learn the Tao. Ancient Masters esteem the Tao know unity with the Tao helps seekers find and the errant receive forgiveness. All love the Tao.

63. One must act without doing, work without effort, think expansively, confront difficulty while it is still easy, and accomplish much by many small acts. By never reaching for what is great, the Master achieves greatness; she yields to difficulties, does not cling to

comfort, and finds problems are not problems. 64. It is easy to nourish what is rooted, to correct what is recent, to break what is brittle, and to scatter what is small. Trouble must be prevented and things put in order before they exist. Trees grow from sprouts and journeys start beneath one's feet (the TAO TE CHING's best-known maxim in the West). Rushing to action, grasping things, and forcing projects to completion bring failure. The Master lets things take their course, as calm at the end as at the start. Having nothing, the Master has nothing to lose. 65. Ancient masters do not educate but teach kindly to "not-know." People who think they know answers are hard to guide, while those who do not know find their own way. Rulers must avoid being clever or rich. Simplicity and contentment can show people the way back to their true nature.

66. As "all streams flow to the sea because it is lower," so humility gives power. One must govern by placing oneself below the people and lead by learning to follow. The Master is above and ahead of all, but no one feels oppressed or manipulated. The world is grateful to the Master, who competes with no one. 67. Lao-tzu admits some find his teaching nonsense, lofty but impractical, but those who look inside themselves see that it makes perfect sense. Those who practice it find deep roots in the loftiness. Lao-tzu teaches only simplicity, patience, and compassion. These return one to the source of being, put one in accord with the way things are, and reconcile all beings in the world. 68. The best athlete wants a good opponent; the best general enters his army's mind; the best businessman serves the communal good, and the best leader follows the people's will. All must embody non-competition and play like children in harmony with the Tao. 69. Generals wait rather than move first and retreat a yard before advancing an inch. They go forward without advancing and push back without using weapons. Underestimating an enemy is terrible and comes from thinking the enemy evil. One destroys three treasures and becomes one's own enemy. Victory comes to the force that knows how to yield.

70. Lao-tzu's teachings are easy to understand but hard to practice. They are older than the world. One can know them by looking inside one's heart. 71. Not-knowing brings knowledge, while presuming to know is a disease. One must know one is sick to become healthy. The Master is her own doctor, healing herself of all knowing and becoming whole. 72. When people lose the sense of awe, they turn to religion. When they lose trust in themselves, they depend on authority. The Master steps back so people will not be confused. She teaches without teaching so people have nothing to learn. 73. The Tao is always at ease, overcoming without competing, answering without speaking, arriving without being called, and accomplishing without a plan. The Tao's net covers the universe and nothing slips through its wide mesh. 74. Realizing that all things change, one holds onto nothing. Being unafraid of dying, one can achieve anything. Trying to control the future is like using a master carpenter's tools and getting cut.

75. High taxes cause hunger and intrusive government makes people lose their spirit. Rulers must act for the people's benefit: trusting them and leaving them alone. 76. At birth people are supple; in death they are stiff; at birth plants are pliant; in death they are brittle. People are disciples of death or of life, depending on if they are inflexible or yielding. The stiff gets broken and the supple prevails. 77. Acting in the world, the Tao bends like a bow, achieving perfect balance. Those who control by force oppose the

Tao, taking from those who lack and giving to those who have too much. The Master gives endlessly, acts without expectation, succeeds without taking credit, and thinks herself better than no one. 78. Water is softer and more yielding than anything but dissolves what is hard. Everyone knows that soft and gentle overcome hard and rigid, but few can practice it. The Master is serene in sorrow, untouched by evil. Giving up helping, she paradoxically becomes her people's greatest help. 79. Failure is an opportunity unless one blames someone else. The Master fulfills her obligations and corrects her own mistakes, does what she needs to do, and demands nothing from others. 80. Wise government results in content, industrious inhabitants who do not waste time inventing labor-saving machines, traveling, and stocking arms. People take pleasure in being with their families and neighbors. They do not bother with the neighboring country and are happy to die without ever seeing it. 81. Eloquence and truth are contradictory; wise people do not need to prove their point and those who prove their point are not wise. The Master has no possessions. The more she does for others the happier she is, and the more she gives the wealthier she is. The Tao nourishes by not forcing. The Master leads by not dominating.

Notes

Notes Summary and Analysis

Following the translated text, Mitchell provides notes on each of the 81 chapters.

1. The Chinese poet Po-Chü-i calls Lao-tzu a "blabbermouth." Mitchell observes that for Buddhists, words are "fingers pointing to the moon" — and sometimes obscuring it. Masters must be meticulous. A monk and Ma-tsu dialog about the latter's teaching, "Mind is Buddha." Those unattached to all things should experience the great Tao. Legend says that this book is a response out of "grandmotherly kindness," to a border guard who wants to understand the art of living. Alternative renderings show the tension between expressible tao and eternal Tao, and Mitchell gives examples of mystery, darkness, and light.

2. Mitchell meditates on the Master's effortless "appropriate responses," acting out the Tao's script and comments on ways of teaching without words and her teachings lasting forever in quality, rather than time and space.

3. Mitchell explains that minds can become childhood only when emptied of concepts, judgments, and desires and then filled with a sense of original identity, which leads to joy. With the false self gone, greed, hatred, and arrogance vanish and people grow self-reliant.

4. Mitchell notes the omission of the second stanza, interpolated from Chapter 56. This follows another modern translator of this work, Ch'en Ku-ying. Mitchell enigmatically observes, "There is no God when there is nothing but God."

5. Mitchell provides a literal translation and explains that straw dogs are ritual objects, venerated and them trampled. It does not mean that the Tao or the Master are cruel, just impartial. All beings arise from karma, usually through suffering, and return to the source. Constant flux allows spiritual transformations, so people should not be judged good or bad.

6. Mitchell provides a literal translation of the first stanza and quotes Chu Hsi on the creative female principle.

7. Mitchell uses the turtle's always being home as an illustration, notes that the Master is always even with all things, quotes Bunan on detachment, and offers an analogy between heart and mirror reflecting clearly.

8. Mitchell's friend, teacher, and founder of Continuum, Emilie Conrad-Da'oud comments on water as the source of life. She calls humans "muscled water," having never left the amniotic fluid - the "fluid of love."

9. Mitchell says blandly that when one works wholeheartedly, one is glad to let go.

10. Conrad-Da'oud comments on the newborn child losing suppleness and spontaneity as it matures into self-images. A supple adult's movements shows "a fourth dimension of time" and experience. Children's movements are pristine and innocent; adults are awesome for the life they include. The more supple - fluid — a body is, the less dictatorial one is. Neither military nor "wishy-washy" posture is healthy. A supple body is stopped by no barriers. Mitchell also quotes Ramana Maharishi on the mystery of humans laughably seeking reality while in fact being reality, and finishes with a note from the classic Ho-shang Kung commentary.

11. Mitchell observes that the true teacher knows there is nothing to teach and thus can teach anyone who wants to learn. The same goes for the true lover who is open to all who need. With nowhere to stand, the Master stands anywhere.

12. Mitchell comments on the senses losing acuteness and decaying when they become too cluttered with objects. He compares Psalm 23 on the desires of the heart, talks about the Master being all right with whatever happens, being compassionate towards his own anger and grief as she would be with a child's. Mitchell notes that the sky has room for everything because it does not care which bodies appear.

13. Mitchell does little to clarify the enigmatic ladder imagery before saying "The outer mirrors the inner."

14. Mitchell paraphrases: "It's right before your eyes."

15. Mitchell allegorizes: "mud" means anything that obscures or narrows reality. The Master's life is pure, placid, predictable, obvious, and transparent, allowing the Tao to shine through. Mitchell's old teacher comments on clear water: adding salt, sugar, or shit to clear water changes the water but it still, originally, is clear. "No thinking, no mind. No mind, no problem."

16. Mitchell clarifies that insight into the Tao has nothing to do with intellect or abstraction. One must step out of self-consciousness to enter the Tao. He quotes Lin Ching-Hsi on the mind originally being empty can only respond non-judgmentally when it is again empty. Lin compares it to a swan flying over a river gorge and a mirror reflecting everything perfectly and retaining nothing afterward. Mitchell then compares this to Einstein on scientists' "rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law."

17. Mitchell notes that the Master's words and actions are always in harmony.

18. Mitchell quotes Jayata to Vasubandu about the Tao being the state of mind that asks nothing. This is perhaps the most audacious example of his assuming readers are experts in all facets of Asian religions. He then comments on rules appearing when the Tao is forgotten, saying it produces goodness "as insecure as Job's" and "as self-satisfied as Little Jack Horner's." Less cryptically, Mitchell says that good fathers have only to act naturally to be good; they need not intend it.

19. Since the Master lacks categories of wise or holy, all feel at home with her.

20. On "yes and no," Mitchell quotes Chao-chou and Nan-ch'üan debating approaching and understanding the Tao and quoting the Master on the delusion of understanding. The unattainable Tao is pure space, where there is no room for yes/no. Mitchell comments on several lines: it is good whether good or bad occur; erase before writing. He quotes Pai-chang on being the same before and after enlightenment except that one is free from delusion and unreality. Ordinary people's and sages' minds are the same because the Original Mind is perfect and complete. This recognition should not be lost.

21. Mitchell quotes Philo on human time concepts and that eternity's only name is "Today."

22. Mitchell talks about accepting oneself to let go of self, knowing oneself to use one's personality to benefit others, and realizing there is no where to stand and no self to know, simply to be. He quotes St. Paul's "Not I, but Christ in me" and, lightheartedly, the child told to stop sneezing who replies, "I'm not sneezing! It's sneezing me!"

23. Mitchell talks of trusting the body's intelligence.

24. Mitchell says "the other is the self"; understanding this, one uses power wisely.

25. Mitchell points forward to Chapter 51 and says, "Ho-hum" about the four powers.

26. Mitchell sums up the Master: she is imperturbable.

27. Declaring this one of the most important chapters, Mitchel describes how and why he has been very free rendering the first stanza and provides a literal translation. Openness and openheartdness must be made clear as possible. Referring to Genesis 2, Mitchell declares, "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is the Tree of Death."

28. On the enigmatic "know the male / yet keep to the female," Mitchell observes that creativity comes from receptivity; they are "complementary sides of the same process."

29. Ramana Maharshi likens seeking to reform the world without discovering one's self to covering the world with leather to avoid pain. It is easier to wear shoes. Mitchell talks of the "Sabbath mind" in Genesis 1 and looks forward to Chapter 35 on universal harmony.

30. Mitchell comments on letting issues resolve themselves and not letting things control one's conscious self.

31. "Peace means wholeness," Mitchell declares.

32. Mitchell comments on "smaller than an electron" that it eliminates categories of small, large, here, there, past, future, and present.

33. "True wisdom" to Mitchell means knowing others by knowing oneself and not needing to master others once one masters oneself.

34. Mitchell says of creation that it is more like giving birth than creating art; there is no conscious plan or purpose; thus, it differs from Genesis 1's "Let there be light." Light simply is — "and is God."

35. Mitchell talks of the Master being centered in peace and thus able to accept pain. On "without flavor," he quotes the enigmatic Seung Sahn on the Tao having no gate any more than clear water has taste or the tongue a bone. Stone girls dance in silence.

36. On shrinking things, Mitchell considers character defects continuing when ignored but withering when brought to awareness. He quotes Blake on the "road of excess" leading to the "palace of wisdom."

37. Mitchell merely affirms Lao-tzu's premise in this chapter.

38. Mitchell talks of the Master having no goal but merely going along for the ride without expectations, regrets, or residue. The Tao cannot be lost but can be found. There is no distinction between the depths and the surface. Flowers and fruit are natural to different seasons and the Master enjoys both.

39. Mitchell likens being shaped by the Tao to a sculptor using painful tools to reveal the statue within rock.

40. "Non-being" is larger than the categories of being and non-being.

41. On indifferent love, Mitchell observes that a good father loves his children equally, no matter how they turn out. He quotes Jesus on loving enemies, specifying that this means treating all with "generosity and compassion."

42. Mitchell makes light of the birthing sequence, gives a literal translation of the statement that, "all things have their backs to the female," and provides the literal text of the final stanza, which he has improvised in his own translation.

43. On gentlest and hardest, Mitchell gives examples: water/rock and love/hostility.

44. Mitchell asks why get caught in dichotomies. Having surrendered to the Tao, the Master accepts whatever comes and uses it for good. Success and failure are equally irrelevant.

45. Mitchell suggests that a cracked coffee cup and the sound of outside traffic are examples of true perfection and attention as an example of "true fullness."

46. Mitchell quotes Franklin D. Roosevelt on having "nothing to fear but fear itself," but adds, "Not even that."

47. Mitchell clarifies that "the more you know" applies too while one fails to know oneself.

48. Mitchell clarifies that things being dropped is good and mastery comes from letting things run their course.

49. On the Master's mind, Mitchell observes that she has a strong will and character but is permeable and subtle. She trusts as a parent trusts a child who has broken a rule. He adds optimistically that when parents are genuine, so, too, are the children.

50. Mitchell devotes one of his longest notes on Chapter 50, observing that some passages reveal a narrower consciousness than the book at large. They may be interpolations or the result of Lao-tzu's indigestion on a given day. Since Mitchell's job is to recreate Lao-tzu's "essential mind," he has to omit these, substituting "improvisations" on the passage's theme, staying within the bounds of the overall work. For the curious, he provides literal translations, which he follows with Seung Sahn's comment on coming in and going out empty-handed and having an original face like the shining moon.

51. Mitchell declares that honoring the Tao means respecting how things are. He quotes from Zenkei Shibayama Roshi's A FLOWER DOES NOT TALK to illustrate how giving thanks for everything and having no complaints whatsoever produce joy.

52. Mitchell suggests meditating on, "Where do you come from?"

53. Mitchell quotes Zen Master Seng-ts'an's advice on finding the "great Way": let go of all preferences and all becomes clear.

54. "Genuine," Mitchell says, means having nothing to hide or defend.

55. Mitchell quotes Chuan-tzu's elaborations about the newborn child's strength, freedom from worry, and self-unawareness, before stating he has improvised another stanza and providing a literal translation.

56. On knowing and talking, Mitchell says that talking is appropriate only when one has something non-self-aggrandizing to say.

57. Mitchell notes that Nature regulates itself without help from humans' "bright ideas."

58.Mitchell provides the literal text for his improvised second stanza.

59. Mitchell provides the literal text for his improvisation.

60. Mitchell says that stepping out of the way is like a sword cutting air without harm.

61.Mitchell provides the literal text for his improvisation.

62. On the Tao being the center of the universe, Mitchell notes that the center is everywhere. A good man's treasure is like a magic purse. Bad people can step outside their ideas of themselves and find a second chance. "No one can achieve it" because "there is no 'it.'" The Master responds to circumstances in appropriate ways, gladly

answering questions from anyone, but otherwise minding her own business and leaving all to the Tao.

63. Mitchell says "difficulty" is a letter with the Master's address on it.

64. Mitchell clarifies that caring about nothing but the Tao does not mean one fails to love others; it means having the perspective of eternity and letting the Tao permeate and intensify all relationships. Without ascription, Mitchell paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:5 on loving God with all one's heart, soul, and strength.

65. Mitchell talks about the ancient Masters emphasizing the "Don't-know Mind," also called the "Beginner's Mind." It is always open, fresh, and fertile.

66. Mitchell clarifies that the Master is above the people not because she feels superior but in order to see more from a higher vantage point. Even those who think they are ungrateful to the Master are in fact grateful. She sees all as her equal.

67. Mitchell provides the literal text for his improvised second stanza.

68. Mitchell provides the literal text for his improvisation.

69. Mitchell recommends using "opponent" rather than enemy.

70. On the ease of putting the Tao into practice, Mitchell commends grass, trees, and animals; he recommends humans keep looking and listening to their insides until all sights and sounds disappear.

71. Mitchell quotes Novalis on waking up when one dreams one is waking.

72. Mitchell observes that the Master does not act like a guru or messiah because this promotes spiritual immaturity. When people start to adore her she points to their inner messiahs. People need to "unlearn."

73. Mitchell observes that Master puts everyone at ease as she is at ease with herself.

74. To show that one ought not to think one knows what is good or bad, Mitchell quotes the Huai Nan Tzu. In a string of seeming good and bad luck, a poor farmer grows rich, his son is injured, and escapes conscription and death thanks to his injury. Who can tell how events are transformed.

75. Mitchell advises offering people the gift of not being dependent.

76. Mitchell suggests that the less rigid one is, the readier one is for life or death.

77. Mitchell observes that the Master is more transparent than others.

78. Mitchell observes that the true philanthropist brings people to where they can help themselves. The Tao's truths are paradoxical only when the mind is cluttered with untruth.

79. Mitchell quotes Confucius on archers blaming themselves for missing the mark.

80. Mitchell observes that correct priorities overcomes curiosity.

81. Mitchell observes that one's "non-possessions" could includes house, computer, and books. Doing for others brings joy because it is doing it for oneself. When one gives completely, one's wealth is "infinite."

Characters

Lao-tzu

The author of the TAO TE CHING, Lao-tzu is perhaps Confucius' older contemporary (551-479 BCE) and may have been an archivist in the petty kingdom of Chou. He has left few traces in history beyond this book, which, Mitchell declares is written out of "grandmotherly kindness" for complicated minds that cannot see simplicity. According to the oldest biography, Lao-tzu lives a long time in the country of Chou but departs when it declines. At the frontier, a guard asks him to write a book teaching him the art of living. Lao-tzu writes it and departs.

Because of his stress on "doing not-doing," Lao-tzu is often perceived as a hermit, but he cares about society. First person passages occur in chapters 20, 21, 29, 54, 67. Lao-tzu admits that some find his teaching nonsense, lofty but impractical, but those who look inside themselves see that it makes perfect sense. Those who practice it find deep roots in the loftiness. Lao-tzu teaches only simplicity, patience, and compassion. Lao-tzu's teachings are easy to understand but hard to practice. They are older than the world. One can know them by looking inside one's heart.

Stephen Mitchell

The translator of the TAO TE CHING, Stephen Mitchell is a native of Brooklyn, NY. He studied at Amherst, the University of Paris, and Yale, and later "unstudies" through fourteen years of Zen training, initially under the Zen Master Seung Sahn, whom he quotes in the endnotes. He indicates a closeness to Continuum founder Emilie Conrad Da'oud and requests that she comment on some chapters. Mitchell works from literal translations and tries to capture Lao-tzu's mind. As a result, he finds it necessary to render loosely at times. In those cases, he provides the literal text in end notes. Through the endnotes, Mitchell makes himself an integral part of the book.

Chu his

A Chinese neo-Confucian philosopher, Chu Hsi is quoted in the notes to Chapter 6, on the female creative principle.

Emilie Conrad-Da'oud

Mitchell's friend, teacher, and founder of Continuum, Emilie Conrad-Da'oud comments at Mitchell's request on Chapter 8, dealing with water as the source of life. She calls humans "muscled water," having never left the amniotic fluid - the "fluid of love." She also comments on Chapter 10, saying that children lose their newborn suppleness and spontaneity as they mature into self-images. A supple adult's movements show "a fourth

dimension of time" and experience. Children's movements are pristine and innocent; adults are awesome for the life they include. The more supple - fluid — a body is, the less dictatorial one is. Neither military nor "wishy-washy" posture is healthy. A supple body is stopped by no barriers.

Ho-shang Kung

A classic commentator on the Tao Te Ching, Ho-shang is quoted in the notes on Chapter 10, saying that when arraigning one's property, one should be calm and flexible as a woman.

Lin Ching-Hsi

A classic Chinese commentator, Lin Ching-Hsi is quoted in notes on Chapter 16, saying that the mind, originally being empty, can only respond non-judgmentally when it is again empty. Lin compares it to a swan flying over a river gorge, and a mirror reflecting everything perfectly and retaining nothing afterward.

Ma-tsu

A Buddhist teacher, quoted in translator Stephen Mitchell's note on Chapter 1, Ma-tsu maintains that "Mind is Buddha" and advises those unattached to all things to experience the great Tao.

Pai-chang

A classic Zen teacher, Pai-Cheng is quoted in the notes on Chapter 20. People are the same before and after enlightenment except that the enlightened are free from delusion and unreality. Ordinary people's and sages' minds are the same because the Original Mind is perfect and complete. This recognition should not be lost.

Po Chü-i

Termed by translator Stephen Mitchell a "poet and stand-up comic," Po-Chü-i comments on Chapter 1's opening the 5,000-word book by talking about not knowing by calling Lao-tzu a "blabbermouth."

Ramana Maharshi

The "great modern Indian sage" whom translator Stephen Mitchell quotes in notes on Chapter 10, Ramana Maharshi laughs at the mystery of humans seeking reality while in fact being reality. Commenting on Chapter 29, Ramana Maharshi likens seeking to

reform the world without discovering one's self to covering the world with leather to avoid pain. It is easier to wear shoes.

Seng-ts'an

A Zen Master whom translator Stephen Mitchell quotes in the comments on Chapter 53, Seng-ts'an advises that to find the "great Way" one must let go of all preferences in order that all things may become clear.

Seung Sahn

Translator Stephen Mitchell's old teacher, the Zen Master Seung Sahn, comments on clear water in Chapter 15's notes: adding salt, sugar, or shit to clear water changes it, but originally it is still clear. "No thinking, no mind. No mind, no problem." Seung Sahn is also quoted in notes on chapter 35, saying the Tao has no gate as clear water has no taste and the tongue no bone. "In complete stillness, a stone girl is dancing." On Chapter 50, Seung Sahn comments on coming in and going out empty-handed and having an original face like the shining moon.

Objects/Places

Tao

Tao in Chinese means way, road, path, or expression. From the outset, the book differentiates a path that can be expressed (lower-case tao) from the inscrutable, eternal Way (upper-case Tao). The Tao cannot be perceived. The Tao is directly discussed in chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 16, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 45, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 68, 69, 77, and 81, often through figures of speech. The Tao is like a well, used but never used up. The Tao is older than God and gives birth to good and to evil. As the "Great Mother," birthing worlds, infinite, and eternal - never born, never dying, desiring nothing for itself and present for all. All things end in the Tao, which flows everywhere, and all things are born from it, but it creates nothing. Every being is an expression of the Tao and spontaneously honors the Tao. The Tao's love is the nature of things. The Tao is the center of the universe - treasure to the good and refuge for the bad. The Tao is beyond value and no one can achieve it. The Tao is always at ease, overcoming without competing, answering without speaking, arriving without being called, and accomplishing without a plan. The Tao's net covers the universe and nothing slips through.

When they hear of the Tao, superior people embody it instantly, average people half-believe and half-doubt, and fools laugh. Every day one adds a bit of knowledge and drops a bit of the Tao, doing less until one reaches non-action. Although the Tao is easy, people prefer side paths. Those planted in and embracing the Tao cannot be moved; they are genuine; their families flourish; their country is an example for others, and the universe sings. One can be oneself only by living the Tao. When one opens oneself to the Tao one is one with the Tao, embodying it completely, and seeing everything fall into place. It works but claims nothing, nourishes but does not hold on, merges with all things and hides humbly. It is great because all things vanish into it and it endures, but is not aware of its greatness - making it truly great. The Tao gives itself up and thus endures. Those who control by force oppose the Tao, taking from those who lack and giving to those who have too much.

The Master

The central figure in the Tao Te Ching, "The Master" is less a discrete man or woman than the embodiment of humanity living in perfect harmony with the way things are. As Chinese does not distinguish between male and female, and translator Stephen Mitchell wishes to avoid male stereotypes, the pronouns are intermixed. For clarity, "she" has been used in this study guide. The Master is described in chapters 2, 3, 7, 12, 15, 17, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 38, 39, 42, 43, 45, 47, 49, 50, 55, 57, 58, 63, 64, 66, 71, 77, 78, 79, and 81.

The Master acts and teaches without doing or speaking, lets things happen, and does not possess or expect. She leads by empowering minds, weakening ambition, and toughening resolve. She welcomes both sinner and saints. She is detached yet one with all things and perfectly fulfilled. She observes the world but trusts her inner vision and allows everything with an open heart. She neither seeks nor expects fulfillment, but is always present and welcoming. She shines because she is one with the Tao, beyond "is and is not." She sets an example, sets no goals, uses all situations, and wastes nothing. She sees how things are and does not try to control them.

The Master does nothing but leaves nothing undone. She practices humility and lets the Tao shape her like a stone and speak for itself. She trusts both the trustworthy and the untrustworthy. She gives herself up to the moment, without illusions or resistance, does not think about actions, but lets them flow from her core, holds back nothing, and is ready for death. The Master achieves greatness, yields to difficulties, does not cling to comfort, and finds that problems are not problems. She lets things take their course, as calm at the end as at the start. Having nothing, the Master has nothing to lose. She is above and ahead of all, but no one feels oppressed or manipulated. The world is grateful to the Master, who competes with no one. She gives endlessly, acts without expectation, succeeds without taking credit, and thinks herself better than no one. The Master is serene in sorrow, untouched by evil. She fulfills her obligations and corrects her own mistakes, demands nothing from others, has no possessions, and leads by not dominating.

The Center

Lao-tzu repeatedly admonishes readers to "Hold on to the center" without developing its meaning beyond the obvious.

Chou

A kingdom in ancient China, Chou is perhaps where Lao-tzu grows up and serves as an archivist. As Chou's fortunes decline, Lao-tzu leaves. This may explain his oft-repeated concerns for proper government.

Doing Not-Doing

A major part of Lao-tzu's teaching, "doing not-doing" (wei wu wei" in Chinese) should not be taken as passivity but rather seen as an athlete's state of being able to move perfectly without conscious will.

A FLOWER DOES NOT TALK

A collection of essays by a contemporary Zen Master, Zenkei Shibayama, A FLOWER DOES NOT TALK provides a version of a Japanese story that describes how the Tao is honored by respecting the way things are. It is quoted in the notes to Chapter 51.

Huai Nan Tzu

A Taoist compendium from antiquity, Huai Nan Tzu provides a story for translator Stephen Mitchell's note on Chapter 74. When a poor farmer's horse runs away to the land of the barbarians, his neighbors console him, but he suggests it may bring good fortune. When the horse returns with an excellent barbarian horse, he counters his neighbors' congratulations by suggesting it may bring disaster. The family grows rich off the horses' offspring and the farmer's son breaks a hip riding; again, the farmer rejects condolences, suggesting it may be beneficial. When the barbarians invade, the son is not conscripting and escapes death like 90% of the youth who go to war. Who can tell how events are transformed.

Moderation

Recommended as the best tool for governing a country, moderation comes by freeing oneself from one's own ideas, tolerance, firmness, suppleness, and openness. Nothing is impossible to those who have let go. This allows a ruler to take motherly care for his/her people.

Water

Water imagery abounds in the Tao Te Ching, as a symbol of purity. Even when flavored or defiled it is originally pure and tasteless. As rivers naturally flow downhill to the sea, rulers should seek to be below those whom they rule, where greatness resides.

Wisdom

In Chapter 14, Wisdom is said to come from realizing whence one comes. It cannot be accomplished by looking, listening, and reaching but by becoming at ease in ones own life.

Yin and Yang

In the notes to Chapter 42, translator Stephen Mitchell describes the familiar principles in Chinese philosophy, the masculine "yin" and the feminine "yang." Mitchell says that blending their energies brings harmony (chi).

Themes

Not-Doing

"Not-doing" is the mysterious way in which the Tao makes things fall into place. The Tao "does nothing but through it all things are done." The Tao is beyond value and no one can achieve it. Above all, trying to control the future is like an amateur using a master carpenter's tools and, inevitably, getting cut. Although people build wheels, craft pots, and construct houses, it is the space within that functions because people work with being, but use non-being.

The Master best illustrates not-doing. She neither seeks nor expects fulfillment but is always present and welcoming. By not displaying herself, by proving nothing, by not knowing herself, and by not setting goals, the Master shines, gains trust and recognition — and succeeds. By contrast, those who rush ahead, trying to shine, define themselves, take power over others, and cling to their work all defeat themselves. Tampering with the sacred world risks ruining it. The gentlest overcomes the hardest and "no substance" enters "no space," which shows the value of "non-action."

The Master teaches without words and performs without actions. Doing nothing, she nevertheless leaves nothing undone. One must act without doing, work without effort, think expansively, confront difficulty while it is still easy, and accomplish much by many small acts. By never reaching for what is great, the Master achieves greatness; she yields to difficulties, does not cling to comfort, and finds problems are not problems. Realizing that all things change, one holds onto nothing. Being unafraid of dying, one can achieve anything.

Leadership and Governance

Wise government results in content, industrious inhabitants who do not waste time inventing labor-saving machines, traveling, and stocking arms. When people lose trust in themselves, they depend on authority. When rulers are centered in the Tao, there is harmony, paradise, peace, and law in the heart. Names, forms, and institutions otherwise arise - and all end. When governing by the Tao, one must not force issues or resort to war, for force always brings a counterforce. Great leaders do not plan or control but let the world govern itself. Prohibitions inhibit virtue; weapons build insecurity, and subsidies kill self-reliance, but letting go of law results in honesty, prosperity, not "common good" but good that is as "common as grass." Tolerant government makes for comfort and honesty, while repression causes depression and craftiness. Trying to make people happy results in misery; trying to make them moral produces vice. Moderation is best and comes from gaining freedom from one's own ideas, tolerance, firmness, suppleness, and openness. If a country is centered on the Tao, evil has no power.

Virtue lies in leading without taking control. The Master leads by empowering minds, weakening ambition, and toughening resolve. When the Master governs, people are not aware she exists, while less apt rulers rate as loved, feared, and despised. Cleverness and knowledge are signs that intelligence is declining, and patriotism a sign of chaos. Not trying to be powerful, the Master is truly powerful, while ordinary people never stop grasping for power. Power requires humility, which means trusting the Tao and not needing to be defensive.

When a nation makes a mistake, it must realize, admit, and correct it. Those who point out faults are benevolent teachers. A nation centered on the Tao nourishes its people and does not meddle in others' affairs. The military receives special consideration in the Tao Te Ching. A country in harmony with Tao makes trucks and tractors not warheads. Fear is the greatest illusion, preparing to defend oneself the greatest wrong, and having an enemy the greatest misfortune. One who sees through fear is safe. Decent people detest and avoid weapons and, if compelled to use them, show restraint and seek peace. If one must fight, one should view the enemy not as demons but as fellow human beings, wish no personal harm, and not rejoice in victory and slaughter. Generals do best to wait for the opponent to move first, go forward without advancing, and push back without using weapons. Underestimating an enemy is terrible and comes from thinking them evil. Victory comes to the force that knows how to yield.

Intellect

The Tao Te Ching warns that looking, listening, and reaching wisdom are impossible, but one can be wisdom. Author Lao-tzu admits that some people find his teaching nonsense, lofty but impractical, but those who look inside themselves see that it makes perfect sense. Lao-tzu teaches simplicity, patience, and compassion. Lao-tzu's teachings are easy to understand but hard to practice. One can know them by emptying the mind and finding peace in the heart. Not realizing the common source of life brings confusion and sorrow, while realizing it brings tolerance, disinterest, amusement, kindness, and dignity. Not thinking ends problems. Neither yes/no nor success/failure mean anything. Lao-tzu prides himself on being expressionless, possessing nothing, having an empty mind, and being dark, dull, alone, and aimless — but drinking from Great Mother's breasts.

When they hear of the Tao, superior people embody it instantly, average people half-believe, and fools laugh. Power, purity, steadfastness, and clarity all seem their opposites. Perfection seems imperfect and fullness empty, but they are not. All of this shows the Tao speaking for itself. The more one knows, the less one understands. The Master has no mind of her own but works with the mind of the people, being good with the good and with the bad. People do not understand the Master, but she treats them like her children. Keeping the mind free from judgment brings peace. When one uses one's light and returns to the source of light, one "practices eternity." Not-knowing brings knowledge, while presuming to know is a disease.

A special aspect of the intellect is talking. The more one uses the infinite Tao, the more one produces, but the more one talks of it, the less one understands. One should express oneself completely and then keep quiet. Those who know do not talk, and those who talk do not know. Eloquence and truth are contradictory; wise people do not need to prove their point and those who prove their point are not wise.

Style

Perspective

The translator of the TAO TE CHING, Stephen Mitchell studied at Amherst, the University of Paris, and Yale, and later "unstudies" through fourteen years of Zen training, initially under the Zen Master Seung Sahn and Continuum founder Emilie Conrad Da'oud, both of whom he quotes in the endnotes. Mitchell does not translate from the Chinese original, but works from literal translations and tries to capture author Lao-tzu's mind.

The endnotes suggest that Mitchell wants to help newcomers to the Tao Te Ching get the most from their study. Unfortunately, he gives little information about those whom he quotes as authorities. If one looks them up, one can see when they live and in what school they belong, but not fathom why they are necessarily called upon to support a given passage in the text. The reader is left taking accepting Mitchell's judgment that the material is apt and helpful.

Mitchell appears to have the general reader interested in spirituality as his target audience. Some of the notes make comparisons to familiar Judeo-Christian passages, reinforcing the idea that a general readership is intended. It cannot be meant for serious scholars because of the abbreviated nature of the notes and the admitted tendency toward the spirit of the text rather than the letter. The TAO TE CHING is a work that clearly engages and delights the translator, and he brings this home to the reader.

Tone

The tone of the TAO TE CHING is optimistic - provided the reader follows the precepts and embraces the Tao (or Eternal Way). It resembles the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures in characterizing, clarifying, rephrasing, illustrating, exhorting, and exemplifying, seemingly at random. To the believer it is certainly an exposition of objective truth: how the universe is ordered. To non-believers it is a subjective work of philosophy, albeit attractive, edifying, and generally delightful. There is no dogmatism, no fire and brimstone proclamations, no overt sexism, ethnic exclusivity, or similar elements that make it difficult for non-believers (and some believers) to read Western religious material.

There is a strong emphasis on "not-doing" and "not-being" that strikes one as at least paradoxical. Translator Stephen Mitchell addresses this in the preface, declaring that "doing not-doing" (wei wu wei" in Chinese) should not be taken as passivity, because author Lao-tzu obviously cares about the good estate of the family and society, but rather should be seen as an athlete's state of being able to move perfectly without conscious will. Lao-tzu admits that some contemporaries laugh at his efforts. It seems likely that to follow the Tao requires intense "unlearning" such as the translator

undergoes under spiritual masters in order to see how to see and live the unseeable. Falling short of that, the book offers much useful information about parenting and many admonitions to good government, including mild but accurate descriptions of what happens when the Tao is not followed.

Structure

The TAO TE CHING consists of 81 brief chapters, each divided into two, three, or four stanzas. Most chapters are under a page long, although some run to a page and a half. There are no page numbers to the chapters, and each chapter begins on a new page with the number in bold red ink at the top. Preceding the text is a brief but indispensable preface. It explains what little is known about author Lao-Tzu and translator Stephen Mitchell's methodology.

Following the text are endnotes on each chapter. Some seem as though Mitchell feels obliged to say something about each chapter, however trivial (contradicting the advice in Chapter 56). Many, however, are meatier, filled with commentaries from ancient and modern writers. Several charming and illustrative folk tales are summarized. Where Mitchell feels obliged to "improvise" in order to capture the spirit of the original as opposed to the literal, he provides English versions of the latter. They are generally sufficiently turgid to convince the reader of Mitchell's wisdom in departing from the original text.

The 81 chapters themselves show minimal organization. The first one differentiates the discernible "tao" (lower case) from the Eternal Tao (upper case). The Master is introduced as one who submits completely to the Tao. How the Master does this is regularly examined, as are the Tao's eternal qualities and non-actions. There are occasional clumps of chapters sharing common themes (e.g., the qualities of good government and military affairs) but these are comparatively rare. Rather, the TAO TE CHING reads like the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew scriptures, where the repetition of themes from various angles helps create an over-all impression. Still, there is little sense of repetitiveness. It is awkward to read and appreciate the text and at the same time consult the notes. They offer some insights, but concentrating on the text seems a better use of one's time.

Quotes

"The tao that can be told / is not the eternal Tao. / The name that can be named / is not the eternal Name.
The unnamable is the eternally real. / Naming is the origin of all particular things.
Free from desire, you realize the mystery. / Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.
Yet mystery and manifestations / arise from the same source. / This source is called darkness.
Darkness within darkness. / The gateway to all understanding." Chapter 1.

"We join spokes together in a wheel, / but it is the center hole / that makes the wagon move.
We shape clay into a pot, / but it is the emptiness inside / that holds whatever we want.
We hammer wood for a house, / but it is the inner space / that makes it livable.
We work with being, / but non-being is what we use." Chapter 11.

"Other people are bright; / I alone am dark. / Other people are sharp; / I alone am dull.
Other people have a purpose; / I alone don't know. / I drift like a wave on the ocean, / I blow as aimless as the wind.
I am different from ordinary people. / I drink from the Great Mother's breasts." Chapter 20.

"There was something formless and perfect / before the universe was born. / It is serene. Empty. / Solitary. Unchanging. / Infinite. Eternally present. / It is the mother of the universe. / For lack of a better name, / I call it the Tao.
It flows through all things, / inside and outside, and returns / to the origin of all things.
The Tao is great. / The universe is great. / Earth is great. / Man is great. / These aer the four great powers.
Man follows the earth. / Earth follows the universe. / The universe follows the Tao. / The Tao follows only itself." Chapter 25

"When a superior man hears of the Tao, / he immediately begins to embody it. / When an average man hears of the Tao, / he half believes it, half doubts it. / When a foolish man hears of the Tao, / he laughs out loud. / If he didn't laugh, / It wouldn't be the Tao." Chapter 41

"When rich speculators prosper / while farmers lose their land; / when government officials spend money / on weapons instead of cures; / when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible / while the poor have nowhere to turn - / all this is robbery and chaos. / It is not in keeping with the Tao." Chapter 53.

"Prevent trouble before it arises. / Put things in order before they exist. / The giant pine tree / grows from a tiny sprout. / The journey of a thousand miles / starts from beneath your feet." Chapter 64.

"My teachings are easy to understand / and easy to put into practice. / Yet your intellect will never grasp them, / and if you try to practice them, you'll fail.
My teachings are older than the world. / How can you grasp their meaning?
If you want to know me, / look inside your heart." Chapter 70.

"When they lose their sense of awe, / people turn to religion. / When they no longer trust themselves, / they begin to depend upon authority.
Therefore the Master steps back / so that people won't be confused. / He teaches without a teaching, / so that people will have nothing to learn." Chapter 72.

"True words aren't eloquent; / eloquent words aren't true. / Wise men don't need to prove their point; / men who need to prove their point aren't wise.
The Master has no possessions. / The more he does for others, / the happier he is. / The more he gives to others, / the wealthier he is.
The Tao nourishes by not forcing. / By not dominating, the Master leads." Chapter 81.

"That's the problem with spiritual teachers. They have to be blabbermouths. But their words are (in the traditional Buddhist metaphor) fingers pointing at the moon; if you watch the finger, you can't see the moon. How meticulous the great Masters had to be!" Notes, Chapter 1, pg. 89.

"Only in being lived by the Tao: This is what Paul of Tarsus meant by, 'Not I, but Christ in me.' Or, in a more lighthearted vein, the little boy who when his mother got annoyed and said 'Stop sneezing!' answered, 'I'm not sneezing! It's sneezing me!'" Notes, Chapter 1, pg. 105.

Topics for Discussion

How does the Master lead by example? How does it make the people feel? Have you known anyone who leads this way?

Stephen Mitchell disagrees with U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt that fear needs be feared. What does the Tao Te Ching teach about fear?

Why do fools laugh at the Tao Te Ching but the wise embrace it?

What does the Tao Te Ching teach about death?

Why is understanding the "nons" — non-doing, non-being - crucial in Lao-tzu's philosophy?

How are masculinity and femininity handled in the text?

What aspect of the Tao Te Ching do you find hardest to grasp? What is your favorite concept in the book?