**A Dao for the Third Millennium:**

**An idiosyncratic exploration of life, its goals and meaning.**

**Jack Parkinson** ©

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Sometimes, a short but diverse assortment of famous names can serve to illustrate the power and reach of an idea better than any collection of maps, references and tables could.

What is it for instance, that could possibly be the connecting link between *these* well-known identities; DT Suzuki: Zen master and professor of philosophy; CG Jung: psychologist, humanitarian and contemporary thinker; Bruce Lee: martial artist and screen idol; Alan Watts: academic, philosopher and writer; Winnie-the-Pooh: Bear of Little Brain and beloved children’s character, Confucius: great philosopher sage, and Jack Kerouac: voice of the ‘beat’ generation.

The answer is that along with *billions* of other people worldwide over the last two and a half millennia, this unlikely fellowship is linked in sharing a debt to a compact, but highly influential set of teachings commonly attributed to a single ancient master.

In addition to inspiring any number of individuals around the world, this particular body of knowledge has also shaped the direction of entire religions. The Buddhist, Hindu and Confucian creeds all owe something vital in their development to these teachings, and without them, there would be *no* enlightenment through Zen, and no Samurai tradition of Bushido...

According to legend, all of this began when a white-haired old man with a reputation for extraordinary wisdom and scholarship, decided to leave city life and spend his declining years in the serenity of the countryside. However, legend has it, that just before his disappearance into final obscurity, he was recognised as a famous academic, and persuaded by a lowly city gatekeeper to write down the essence of his teaching to the world. Agreeing to this request, he wrote down the essential nature of life’s meaning, and his guidelines for personal fulfilment, in a scant five thousand words; all penned just over two days.

This short tract was to become one of the most important texts in world history, exerting considerable influence on the world’s great religions, *and* on the world's great academics and philosophers for century after century. In this process it also became a major force in the intellectual and spiritual history of all of humanity. In short, this was the pre-eminent, epoch-making text of its era...

Of course, no matter how compelling the idea, nothing that is recorded and discussed, analysed and criticised *ad infinitum*, can remain in vogue forever; and much later, as the tide of history ebbed and flowed, this seminal work eventually ceased to be widely regarded (except among a very few) as having anything more than archaic significance. It is true to say that, In western cultures, even in relatively recent times, and even despite that fact there has been something of a resurgence of interest in this field of personal fulfilment since the mid (to late) twentieth century, the work is still hardly commonly known, certainly widely misunderstood, and not generally considered to be genuinely relevant to the modern world.

The old man who authored this colossus of humanitarian ideas was Lao Zi; and the work in question was the ‘Dao de Jing’; and *this particular* work is built on the premise that; if Lao Zi had something to say that was *genuinely so* important he could sway the *whole* world back then …perhaps we could all still benefit by listening now…

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The question "How shall we live our lives?" is one that has kept generations of philosophers busy and at odds with each other. The accumulation of all their labours is an immense legacy of enormous libraries packed full of research, deduction, intuition and conjecture. With that huge body of knowledge available for anyone to dip into, it is tempting to believe that the answers to life's dilemmas may already be all available in philosophic literature, if only we knew where to look…

Then again, since the library is now so vast, and the wisdom still accumulating at what seem like almost exponential rates, perhaps this task should be delegated to those with experience in the field; maybe it is something best left to the experts…

There is however, a crucial factor that weighs against allowing, or even seriously *considering* the idea of allowing, such fundamentally important elements of our own individual being to become the exclusive domain of a small and highly educated elite. This crucial factor is recognition of the reality that we all have our lives to lead, and we are all stuck with moral choices and decisions that are *ours alone* to take. The answers to life's dilemmas are of little use if they are known to a privileged handful, and yet still remain inaccessible to the majority.

In our daily lives, we need practical information and direction to keep us on the right track to make it at least possible to develop our true potential. Occasional access to an expert simply will not do. The facility to research and evaluate our mistakes in hindsight is interesting, but hardly the best use of the available information on how to live a fulfilled and happy life; if indeed such information *is* really available...

Anyone seeking a kind of personal ‘spiritual compass’ for guidance in day-to-day living, and entering the rarefied world of the great philosophers with a view to appraising all that has been said and *then* distilling this down to a single set of *the* crucial conditions for a happy life; is facing a seriously daunting challenge. The range of work on offer is immense, the intellectual challenges overwhelming. Whole lifetimes and the prodigious output of a good many extraordinary minds have gone into even relatively limited areas of this quest.

A person seeking to swallow the sum of all philosophy and extract from this body of knowledge, insight and dogma a personal 'way of living,' is in the same position as the person seeking to absorb every specialty in the field of medicine, or learn every language in the world. Life is too short. And, if it takes many lifetimes to establish the meaning of a single lifetime; why would anyone bother?

Beyond these considerations, there is yet another nagging problem to consider. All those great philosophers who devoted their lives to the problems of life and living undoubtedly had at least *some* of the answers. They knew a thing or two about life and how to live it. So, they should have been, by and large, happy, contented and fulfilled people; or at least one might assume. After all, they spent years researching and refining the key questions, did they not? But the nagging question remains; where they *really* any better off than the rest of us?

Although some great thinkers undoubtedly lived lives of quiet satisfaction, the available evidence suggests that this was most emphatically *not* always the case. In fact, a close examination across a range of the personal histories of the great thinkers of history reveals eccentricities galore: pessimists and depressives, neurotics, megalomaniacs and obsessives. Many of the people we think of as *the* great philosophers, scholars and savants were socially dysfunctional. Some were marginalised or outcast, culturally inept, lonely, and even outright suicidal in a number of instances. Quite frequently, their contemporaries regarded them with anything from incomprehension, ranging through mild derision to outright contempt.

For a good many philosophers, the innate complexities of their studies and their absorption in the intellectual task ensured that any semblance of ‘normal’ family life came a distant second to their musings and theorising. They often lacked a solid presence in our real world. Hegel and Kant certainly do not appear as particularly warm figures, Schopenhauer and Sartre shared a penchant for the bleakest pessimism if little else. Nietzsche became insane and was institutionalised after his writings deteriorated to rantings. The polished-leather pomp and pseudo-science of Nazism seduced Heidegger. Plato, Husserl, William James, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty and many others lived cloistered lives in academe far away from everyday reality. For Diogenes, a barrel was allegedly enough and for Thoreau, a hideaway from the world in the form of a hut in the woods. Marx lived in poverty; Freud was brilliant, but narrowly fixated on matters sexual and on trying to foist his own idiosyncratic traits into the psyches of the rest of the world. Of the ancient masters K’ung-fu-tse (Confucius) and Lao Zi, little is known but legend…

Essentially, what you get when approaching the great philosophers for guidance on living an ordinary life is mostly endless complexity. Days spent grappling with Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' can leave you dizzy, and perhaps even awestruck by the author’s impeccable mastery of topic, and yet no wiser in any kind of practical sense when it comes to applying what you have learned to *your* life. The great philosophers are, as often as not, impenetrable. Similarly, a sound knowledge of the beings *en-soi* and *pour-soi* and the nature of freedom may help you understand what drove Jean Paul Sartre to some of his bleaker conclusions on human nature, but as a lesson in living, this work is as likely to be more depressing than uplifting and is certainly not guaranteed to better *your* situation.

There can be any number of dead ends and meandering diversions for the person seeking enlightenment from the traditional masters in philosophy and theology. You may not be impressed or inspired by the ecstasies of the religious visionaries. You may be disinclined to follow the übermensch as portrayed in *Thus Spake Zarathustra[[1]](#footnote-1)* and *you* may quickly weary of the various schools of received wisdom; the technical arguments, the syllogisms, the formality of proposition and refutation.

Sometimes, it is best to get back to the absolute basics, and the good news is that there is an alternative. When one is worn down by the semantics and the theoretical constructs, when practical, simple advice untainted by any pretence or sophistry is all that is needed, there is still a resource available. For those who *really* want to get down to bare essentials, there is still the *Dao de Jing —* a short introduction to the ultimate profundities that has been around for about 2,500 years…

The Lao Zi text can be considered as a kind of universal primer to enlightenment for *anyone* with an interest in their own spiritual development. For those with the capacity, *and* the inclination to accept the advice tendered, it is of little import what their religious inclination may be, or even if they reject all brands of theism and the personified deity altogether in favour of some more earthly 'ism'. Lao Zi is not about faith, except insofar as one might need belief in one’s own abilities

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'Lao Zi' translates as the 'Old Man', or even the 'Old Boy' according to some authorities, sometimes it is mentioned that he was born with white hair. According to popular legend, the 'old boy' was the librarian-scholar who authored the *Dao de Jing* around 500BC. Opinions on precise dating differ by several hundred years or so, and it becomes periodically fashionable in academic circles to attribute the work to a group rather than a single individual, which means that even the very existence of the ‘old boy’ is contentious from time to time.

The original text of the *Dao de Jing* has presented generations of scholars with huge problems in translation, or more accurately, in transliteration, since the subtleties of Chinese characters rarely translate in any direct and easy manner into English words. The complicating use of historic metaphor and allusion, not to mention the cultural gap, the immense antiquity of the text and the very real possibility that the work has been amended, edited and otherwise 'improved' by later scholars are all factors conspiring to obscure essential meaning.

Yet for all that, when given a chance, the Lao Zi text has rare qualities of clarity of insight. And, but for the obscurity of context and accumulation of errata over the years, perhaps it might even now be widely recognised as one of the most straightforward and uncomplicated guides to the age-old question posed by social scientists, philosophers, theologians and more importantly, by ordinary people everywhere. The question: 'How should we live our lives?'

My own first experience with the *Dao de Jing* was as a teenager, discovering the text in the Penguin Classics translation by DC Lau. At first encounter, some of the grammatical intricacies and the vagueness of many of the references lost me almost immediately, but despite the problematical elements, elsewhere in the book the message was clear enough, and it was also forceful enough to make a lasting impression.

The *Dao de Jing* has something in common with what may reasonably be considered companion (if not quite contemporary) texts such as the *T'ai I Chin Hua Tzung Chih* (the Secret of the Golden Flower) and the *I Ching* (The Book of Changes). These are all seminal works in the development of Eastern thought, although the *Dao de Jing* remains (arguably perhaps) the earliest, simplest and most concise text.

The other texts each have their areas of specialisation: the *T'ai I Chin Hua Tzung Chih* is generally of greater interest to those wishing to develop meditative techniques, and for those interested in the Dao of longevity and personal power. The *I Ching,* despite its many centuries as the object of serious scholarly philosophic study, is regarded primarily as a fortune-telling oracle in the west. It should be said here that, although it is regularly given the same dismissive treatment any fairground pretender in clairvoyance might attract, the *I Ching* nevertheless remains an unparalleled resource for the genuine student of philosophic ideas as they are applied in a practical context; and especially when it is read in the justly renowned Richard Wilhelm translation with an introduction by CG Jung[[2]](#footnote-2).

Eastern thought has a very long tradition of convergence in which Daoist and Confucian texts have both been shaped by, and become infused with, Buddhist and other influences. The Lao Zi work, along with its various commentaries, is no exception. The *Dao de Jing,* a little over 5,000 words of simple, yet compelling elegance, has occupied scholars and philosophers for more than two millennia. As well as providing the inspiration for the entire Confucian school, this work is the source of much of later Buddhist thought, and in particular, inspired the philosophic school of enlightenment through revelation that is known to us as Zen.

The Lao Zi teachings I first encountered had a compelling power, and even in the series of often clumsy translations then available, appeared to hold out the promise of some tantalising insights, despite the obvious accretion of linguistic errors and doubtful annotations. Even in some of the more inept translations, the ‘old boy’ appeared to be offering a fleeting glimpse of some enormous revelation; something of cosmic significance, but at the faint margins of everyday comprehension. However, it was a glimpse too often lost at some misconstrued or partly understood referent.

Unfortunately, the *Dao de Jing* is a work whose essential meaning is often shrouded in extraneous information. Many readers may be confused by the apparent necessity of taking into account the factors that might logically explain it; its cultural and historical setting, history of scholarly revision, etc. Over time, my growing suspicion was that in practice, these ever-growing interpretive frameworks might only serve to overlay a quite unnecessary series of layers of complexity on something that was *meant* to stand alone in its simplicity. But of course, by the time this realisation was reached, all of those areas of complication had been thoroughly examined…

All this is not to say that the old boy’s thought can now be made instantly comprehensible to all. Lao Zi's brand of unifying philosophy was, and is, only ever going to be accessible to those with the will to tackle the broader conceptual framework of living and meaning; to tackle the job the Daoists style, ‘work on the self.’ The old boy insists that this willingness to embrace personal growth is the essential prerequisite of wisdom, harmony and the greater good. Given that this commitment from the reader is forthcoming, he then puts the words on the page to further our understanding, not to baffle and bemuse us with a display of his superior and soaring intellect.

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As I returned to the text in later years, what struck me repeatedly, even as I began to get my own personal feel for the underlying composition, were some of the glaring inconsistencies of the *Dao de Jing*. There were without doubt, some basic distortions, and misplacement of lines. There were also some less than generous summations by subsequent critics and the misinterpretations of those historians who clearly either did not care about, or did not grasp the philosophical import of the text to any significant extent. The final obscuring factors were the interpretations of those literalists and fundamentalists interested only in the semantic associations of the words on the page and their historical contexts in ancient Chinese culture. These authors seemed unconcerned with the message and quite incorrectly focused on the medium of communication.

The ‘old boy’ is certainly a lot more than words on a page, my initial summation was that he is communicating what he would consider to be an absolutely coherent creed on how to live a life of fullness and integrity. It is not his failure that the conceptual framework of his thinking does not always suit our contemporary understanding, or even perhaps in some instances *his* contemporary understanding. When for instance, Lao Zi emphasises the virtue of inaction or no action, he leaves plenty of scope for misinterpretation. However, he is not advocating a life of aimless drifting, and he is most assuredly *not* turning his back on anything that should or must be done. That the old boy might ever promote passive resignation is a viewpoint quite untenable to anyone who has considered the deeper import of the text, and this remains true regardless of how scholarly and intimidating the authority proposing it.

By any reasoned evaluation, the old boy was no advocate of laziness and self-delusion; Lao Zi is counseling a disciplined restraint, a very different proposition to passive acceptance. Yet historically, some commentators have accepted the inaction principle in the *Dao de Jing* as a literal truth, failing to see that the old boy demonstrates the capacity for action often enough when the occasion warrants. In reality, 'No action' Lao Zi style is best equated with the martial arts principle whereby a smaller, weaker person gets the better of a heavier, stronger opponent by using the opponent's own strength to defeat him. 'No action' in this sense is 'going with the universal flow' and taking the line of minimal effort. It is having the patience to await the right moment and, whatever else it may be; it is strength applied at the critical moment rather than weakness expressed as passive acceptance.

The other material point that the old boy is trying to make with his principle of inaction is the idea that 'action' is a means to an end, and not generally an end in itself. This simply means that when the goal is achieved, no more action is necessary, and tranquility and harmony are now made possible.

To take this a step further, the very essence of ‘proper action,’ is that it leads to inaction via completion. The old boy would equate this to necessary ‘work on oneself’. Completion represents a step towards satisfaction, or lack of desire, and through that, to peace, harmony, and ultimately towards that nebulous wholeness or unity we call ‘Dao’. The real 'virtue' here is economy of action. Lao Zi has no time for the ill-considered deed, or the pointless 'busywork' by which individuals lacking purpose and / or guidance fritter away their lives.

Much of the advice offered by the old boy is offered as correct conduct for leaders; those in positions of power and influence - which is not to say that this is also not suitable advice for any ordinary person - the old boy addresses himself to those with the most freedom and authority to act. Therefore, in the context of the state rather than the individual, inaction also means restraint; less rigorous management and less intervention by governments. Lao Zi was very much a proponent of government with a light hand. He sees a heavy-handed administration as a form of over-steering, in which the vehicle of state continually oscillates between opposing and unduly immoderate policy positions like an overloaded truck veering from one side of the road to the other.

To put this idea in a modern context; consider for a moment the history of western governments since World War II; except in times of war, governments are almost invariably judged by their citizens to be more heavy-handed than they need to be, and since WWII, have vacillated in their social engineering between actions such as socialising and nationalizing telecommunications, education, health/medicine, banking, transportation, and industries such as steel and mining. By contrast were all the policies of a quite opposing nature; divestiture of public assets and governmental functions to corporate interests, treating aged care, health, education, even legislation and prisons as business opportunities; rather than the responsibilities of elected officials. In the last two generations we have seem radical extremes of governmental action at both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

Lao Zi is relevant here, and indeed, the old boy’s message is as pertinent now as it was two millennia ago. He advocates that by simply loosening the reins a little, these forays into radical extremism can be avoided, and thus, a straight and easy course is possible; moderation in all things being the key. This in essence, is his principle of least effort for the greatest good.

There is another vital reason why governments should rule with the lightest of hands; which is that only by allowing a high level of individual freedom and choice can a government ensure that the ordinary people retain the possibility of being allowed to develop to their full natural potential.

So, I learnt that, with just a little untangling of the web, Lao Zi can be shown as presenting a succinct and impeccably logical case for moderation of word and deed while maintaining harmony for both individual and state. Nothing is hidden, nothing left unsaid. The whole thing is a model of poetic economy; and as germane now as it was in 500 BCE. It still seems nothing short of incredible that such a short tract could have such deep personal and political implications.

Extracting meaning from the extant texts is not all plain sailing however; the conceptualisation of inaction is not the only problematical area in the *Dao de Jing*. If the whole work is *really* an attempt at self-evident simplicity, then by definition, there is no place at all for any baffling passages of mystic rumination. There must be a (relatively) distinct and simple meaning to be grasped everywhere. This presents some major challenges to the would-be analyst: What is ‘the gateway of manifold secrets?’ What did the old man have in mind when he said, ‘When the gates of heaven open and shut, are you capable of keeping to the role of the female?’ What is this apparently vague ‘nothing’ from which even the highest good comes?

Leaving aside those apparently inscrutable passages for a moment, let us make our first reasonable assumption here and now. This assumption is that the text of the *Dao de Jing* was meant to be a readily comprehensible lesson for an ordinary educated contemporary of the old boy. The second assumption, and one that seems equally reasonable, is that Lao Zi was *genuinely* trying to communicate the ‘meaning of life’ as he saw it.

One logical first step in unravelling a puzzle such this is to consult a selection of the numerous other translations and commentaries of the work. In doing this, I concluded that the difficulties are in two main areas. These are linguistic difficulties; firstly, the problem of literal versus actual meaning in the many translated texts, and secondly, the frequently encountered problem of the actual meaning imputed to a passage being tainted with the cultural and other prejudices of early translators and scholars.

Many of the translations and commentaries on the *Dao de Jing* are surprisingly poor, and in the majority of instances, the authors and commentators have been content to simply highlight the problematical passages and point out that they are corrupt or misplaced without offering much in the way of an explanation of what was actually intended. It also seemed to me at least, that elsewhere in the work, discussion of possible alternative meanings of words on the page was frequently taking precedence over accurate discernment of the meaning of the whole.

Thinking about these problems, I could almost imagine hearing the old boy chuckling. After all, if a work has real contemporary as well as historic value it *must* lend itself to interpretation into a contemporary framework of meaning. Indeed, the instant this becomes impossible is the precise instant that the text exchanges any genuine relevance for a lesser existence as a document of quaint historic interest. Furthermore (I reasoned), in any attempt to express a profundity within a conceptual framework, the ultimate meaning is beyond any doubt, always more important than the scaffolding of the language used to express it. So, we ought not to get bogged down in definitions of individual words… but we should be ruthless in seeking fundamental meaning…

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Despite this apparent necessity to tear through the scholarly obfuscations, there is always a reluctance to engage in a radical dissection of a very old and respected work. Since no one wants to be accused of despoiling a masterpiece by frivolous revision, there is a tendency to sanctify the literal text of ancient documents at the expense of real meaning. By way of illustration, the various translations of the Bible; for example, the King James Version, have copious amounts of translation errors long acknowledged by scholars, yet perpetuated for generations in successive reprints and tolerated by long habituation. As a document of comparable antiquity to the *Dao de Jing*, the Bible is also a work argued over by those who would literally accept the ‘word’ and those commentators seeking analogies that render the text more accessible and more meaningful to contemporary readers.

After following this train of thought for a while, I felt much more comfortable with introducing my own 'cultural and other prejudices' to the work of Lao Tzu, but even more impatient with translations bogged down in the literal meanings of individual words. Whatever else the old boy was doing, he was not deliberately trying to be obscure. There are no fancy semantics. He wanted to communicate some profound ideas and to make them as accessible as he knew how. The fact that he was stuck with the word-usage forms, and the conventions of allusion, allegory and metaphor of his day is unfortunate for us attempting to bridge the gap, but ultimately the descriptive limitations and changeable nature of language and conventional reason cannot be made his responsibility.

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The antiquity of the syntax and obscurity of the cultural and historical allusions are the factors, which, more than anything else, have tended to make the *Dao de Jing* text less accessible to the broad range of ordinary educated people it was originally meant for, and these difficulties have conspired, regrettably, to relegate the work to an abysmally narrow group of specialists and individuals with a suitably informed viewpoint.

With these considerations in mind, my concern that I was in some way performing an act of desecration in mangling or distorting the original text lessened. In fact, I now felt much freer to engage in a hunt for underlying meaning; and even one that might ultimately be at the expense of the poetic form that has survived for twenty-six centuries. What this means of course is that *this* interpretive work is idiosyncratic and may not be agreeable to everyone. How one person relates to this ancient classic is hardly likely to hold true for all. It does not really matter. There is *something* for everyone. And after all, anyone who wishes to do so is still free to consult, and reinterpret, the original ancient texts at any time. The outward form is always more accessible than any deeper meaning that can be ascribed to it.

This pragmatic prioritising of the fundamentals of meaning over the superficialities of expression was something the old boy would surely have thought reasonable; even if *he* disagreed with some of the interpretations. The Lao Zi I was getting to know is essentially practical and a realist. He has no patience with idle intellectualising, point scoring or prevarication; his every sentence seeks to cut to the heart of the topic under discussion. In this respect, the *Dao de Jing* may be considered as an exercise in restrained lucidity. However, to succeed in his quest to get the readers to comprehend his meaning through ‘work on the self,’ Lao Zi also needs to force them to leave the comfort zones of their familiar modes of being and thinking. The old boy knows that a proper grasp of his teaching (i.e. an approach to the mysterious Dao) generally involves a new, or at least unfamiliar, mental orientation. Understanding of the abstractions he is communicating does not come easily to minds focused on the trivia of everyday affairs. The old boy requires the broadly inclusive mental parameters of 'the big picture' way of thinking..

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The big picture; this is what the old boy is all about. To seek inclusive solutions to the questions of life is to get ever closer to the all-embracing Dao. Though the Dao is often visualised as a kind of universal exegesis, or a template for higher consciousness, it is often easier to think of it as more a process than a thing. The Dao is more about the journey than arrival; it is often conceptualized as a striving for; the Way, as it is often designated. Most of all, it is the grasping and acceptance of a few simple and quite basic truths. Far from being an intellectual edifice resting on a whole series of rationalisations, it is much more like a direct apprehension of the way in which all things inter-relate. It could even be thought of as a feeling of intrinsic rightness in surrendering the self to the natural order.

When Lao Zi advocates the application of minimal effort to every problem in life, this is not because he is innately indifferent to the real needs of individuals and to the important crises in the physical world, but because he thinks in terms of the universal ebb and flow of events. In doing this, he lives with the comprehension that much of human energy is wasted on actions that go against nature and, since humanity is part of nature, are therefore ultimately futile and self-defeating. He thinks globally and acts locally in the most literal, natural, common sense, and yet self-effacing way he can. He wants neither personal power nor personal riches; his sole intent is the pursuit of the harmony that comes from attaining an achievable life goal. From the very beginning he accepts the difficulty of the task he has set himself.

In the Penguin Classic translation by DC Lau, he opens with:

"The way that can be spoken of, is not the constant way;

The name that can be named, is not the constant name.

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;

The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets,

But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.

These two are the same, but diverge in name as they issue forth.

Being the same they are called mysteries,

Mystery upon mystery — The gateway of the manifold secrets"[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here, at the beginning of the third millennium, a first glance at this ancient passage might easily result in a dismissive judgment. Perhaps it appears a little too transcendent and esoteric to be truly relevant to the nitty-gritty of contemporary affairs. But the old boy is no woolly mystic; he is issuing a serious warning and within a few words, he is already cutting direct to the core of the mysterious Dao essence. Only the linguistic and cultural detritus of the intervening centuries obscures the essential meaning.

But — if the need for meaning really *does* conquer the urge to respect the form, we are free to rephrase and remake until we have a new interpretive rendition in whatever form makes sense to us. A first step is necessary; and this is what made sense for me:

1.

What we are taught of being is not all there is to know.

The knowledge that would define reality is not all there is to learn.

The unknown is the beginning of things —before heaven or earth.

The known is the place where we experience our reality in the world.

To cease yearning — gives insight into what is unknown,

To embrace yearning — gives insight into the known.

The known and the unknown begin in each other,

In this way, darkness is born,

And a gateway to a mystery opens in the shadows.

Now we start to get a glimpse of exactly where the old man is coming from. In these lines he is setting the ground rules and pointing out that some of the supposedly stable bedrock underpinning our comprehension may not be quite as solid as we supposed: This unaffected opening is full of meaning. In fact, the multi-layered strands of significance are so extensive in these few simple lines that several levels of 'unpacking' are needed to extract anything like an overall picture.

Typically, the old man makes no attempt whatsoever to ease us into his thought patterns, his very first lines aim straight at the innermost heart of the mysterious Dao; he simply tells it the way he sees it without preamble. Consider these interpretations and implications for instance; they are just a part of what may be extrapolated from the density of information this opening message:

Amongst other things, Lao Zi is telling us here that no amount of factual knowledge guarantees wisdom, and that reason alone is insufficient for total understanding. He points out that we are fixed in a 'now' we may pretend to understand, but we *must* also realise that there is a fuzzy margin to our understanding and neither a proper beginning nor a proper end to it. He wants us to accept that uncertainty permeates our discernment, and open our minds to the possibility that all that is unknown casts doubt on all that we think we may know.

Here too, in these opening lines, is the first mention in the text of the being/non-being divide. In common with the philosophers of many schools and religions, the old man insists that there is more to life than facts quantifiable and capable of being catalogued in rational enquiry. It should perhaps come as no surprise that the predominantly scientific and rational orientation of western thought runs into some early difficulties with Lao Ziunless it is accompanied by a flexible appreciation of the intractable human dilemmas against which rationality often struggles to no avail.

This first conflict arises in our generally overly simplistic acceptance of the rationalist principle at the very foundations of our western modes of thought: Science seeks closure by limiting and defining; rejecting anything that cannot be conclusively described. In its probing and microscopically detailed examination of the nature of reality, science is innately the province of specialists in narrow areas and their conclusions are tried, tested and proven. By contrast, the old boy is an unabashed Universalist, and despite the simplicity of the language, he searches for the all-inclusive and seeks to incorporate the indefinable, *and the irrational*, on the grandest of macrocosmic scales.

The micro and macro of the respective juggernauts of empirical science and religious/spiritual unification appear irreconcilable. But, perhaps there is not as much distance between them as superficial consideration might indicate. Indeed, if the old boy is right, there *must* be a way of reconciling and integrating these contradictory conceptualisations of our world. In fact, if we consider some of the advances made over the last one or two generations, some progress *is* being made. There are now researchers in fields as diverse as physics, mathematics, statistics, and the social sciences who are prepared to admit that our 'natural laws' are all capable of being subsumed into a more comprehensive 'big picture.' As science proliferates, so does faith, with the two being uneasy partners at best and sworn enemies at worst

The metaphysics of spiritual unity and the empirical realms of science seem worlds apart, yet Lao Zi insists that the ‘the whole’ is just that; these apparent opposites must — *and can* — be reconciled. Karl Popper[[4]](#footnote-4) showed the world that no scientific theory is ever conclusively proven as true. However, the bad news is, any theory *can* be conclusively proven as false if even a single contrary fact is admitted as valid. The point is this, even a theory that has stood the test of time for generations is not immune to the sudden revelation of some contrary fact that will disprove it. Our view of the way the world works is never fully explained by science, it is simply our best practical current modelling of the reality we experience. The old boy is never anti-science, far from it, he just asks us to recognize that the rational model is incomplete, and not the only choice available.

This may sound unlikely, but it has a solid basis in fact; the truth is that *anyone may live just as easily by a spiritual, as by a scientific paradigm of existence*. Neither of these however, is the way of the Dao, and the old boy would advise us that it would be better still, to find ultimate fulfillment in the reconciliation of **both. As we shall see later in this work, it is demonstrably possible to live a full and orderly life in which all the problems of individual, family and society are successfully addressed in a totally non-scientific and irrational way**. *Need cross ref the section later*

Right now, across the range of western cultures, it is generally science and rationalism that hold sway, and as knowledge and insight expands, our model of the cosmos grows with it, or is replaced by something more functionally representative of the new perception. Sometimes there is a scientific or social revolution and the whole world jumps to a new level of comprehension almost overnight; the Earth is *not* flat and *does* orbit the sun. Microbes *can* cause disease; the seat of intelligence is *not* in the heart…

The principle of all scientific advance is the same as that by which Einstein's physics subsumed Newton's, and the often-postulated 'grand unified theory' of physics may eventually enclose and unite both the micro world of quantum mechanics and the macro world of relativity. Each successive revision provides a bigger picture, although even *that* picture may be one that still falls well short of the ultimate whole...

What Lao Zi offers us is a model of our internal, spiritual and sentient universe to not only rival any paradigm of physical reality advanced by science, but to incorporate it entirely. He is engaged in focussing his and his reader's will and ambition on the biggest picture of them all; something we can still only refer too vaguely as the whole or the Dao.

We need to stop at this point, and be aware; *really aware*! We must accept that in trying to grasp this Dao totality purely at the level of intellect, we are undertaking a fundamentally futile task. We are like the tape measure that tries to measure itself, the box that tries to enclose itself, and the map that attempts to be so inclusive it actually becomes indistinguishable from the ground that it is mapping…[[5]](#footnote-5)

In essence, any teaching that looks at ultimate totality ( and the old boy is doing just that) is looking at *something* that actually incorporates and subsumes all of science, and all of existence; everything… When we try to grasp totality, we are in the position of the person attempting to drain the ocean by bailing with a bucket. All is not lost however; inability to grasp a thing in its entirety does not imply we should simply abandon any hope of understanding the concept at all. If we did this our position in the world would be precarious indeed, after all we *do* know something about oceans despite our shortcomings with the bucket. In practice, we work with whatever level of understanding (and misunderstanding) we can muster to the problems of our lives; and this is generally sufficient to get by.

To illustrate this: the notion of a *thing*, an object called '747' is familiar to me; I know what it is for, and what it can do, and I am satisfied there is nothing more I really need to know to utilise it effectively now and for the foreseeable future. Yet, the reality is that my knowledge has severe limitations. Faced with a mountain of aircraft parts, I could not lecture with any authority on their individual relation to the whole; much less proceed to build a jumbo jet. I simply accept, or more likely, I am blissfully unconscious of the multitude of the constituent parts and only really see them and recognise them in the context of the whole they become.

Similarly, Lao Zi addresses those individuals mired in the intricacies of the spare parts that make up the world. His focus is on making people look to the totality, the world as the end product of all of history so far. Beyond that, the goal is to find harmony and the ultimate meaning of existence in the way the parts fit together in the whole.

The temptation of course, is always to limit our perception of the world to that which we know and feel comfortable with, to voluntarily put on the blinkers and choose to ignore or deny everything not directly relevant to our own lives. For Lao Zithis is the inferior way, figuratively at least, the old boy is now jumping up and down and hurling abuse at us. He is telling us that we court disaster by denying a vital part of life. We are rejecting the whole for the comfort zone, and in the whole is the greater good — the Dao.



With this we are back to the nature of this mysterious unifying principle just as Lao Zi returns to it repeatedly and relentlessly. We already know we cannot get a direct grip or definition of the whole, certainly language is insufficient. Just occasionally though, we may get a flash of illumination that reveals some facet of this hidden essence and provides a sudden epiphany; that Eureka moment of understanding that comes when some hidden aspect of obscure nature is momentarily revealed and understanding dawns.

The old boy is steadfastly promoting to us that there is a universal meaning hidden in the idea of Dao, which given the right setting, will resonate for almost everyone. We might also note here in passing that this pursuit of 'something hidden' is a ubiquitous principle; something common to all of religion and philosophy. There is compelling evidence from any number of sources that all of humanity *needs and seeks* a mysterious 'other' to achieve completion. While the names of our Gods change and proliferate as new religions arise, and while the means of approaching them fall into disuse as ever more new representations of the absolute capture the common imagination; the personal quest for individual realisation through spirituality or the acceptance of dogma is something that endures down through the centuries and the millennia.

Any observer of the human condition might rightly conclude that humanity as a whole generally *wants* this unseen something or other with a passion. Even though individual ideas of what *it* might be may differ in a host of different ways: Grace, the all, harmony, the Godhead, tranquility, the Dao, enlightenment, wisdom, Buddha-hood, the divine light, unity, integration, nirvana, understanding, totality, peace, fulfilment, completion, getting your head together — the meaning of life…

What is more, humanity is prepared to go to any lengths to obtain this essence, although the journey is not always one of light and celebration. Those set on personal realisation include both saints and sinners. Some have been known to give up family, friends and creature comforts; some train their minds even at the expense of their physical bodies, expiating sin and cleansing their souls by scourging themselves with whips and condemning themselves to lives of poverty and discomfort. Some, moved by a force beyond reason, will radically transform themselves; and not always for the better. The spiritual search can inspire much more than the realisation of the potential of a single human life, it can be bent to murder and torture in God’s name; and even lead to the sacrifice of one’s own kind on a bloody altar.

Motivated by the desire for communion in some realm of the absolute, soul-searchers have been known to ingest poisons and mind-bending drugs. They have performed super-human feats of endurance, relinquished all comforts of life, and suffered any torment on themselves, or others, which might lead them closer to their ultimate goal…

Looked at in this light, when we consider the concept of Dao, and the spiritual impulse in general, we are not simply indulging in some frivolous intellectual exercise. We are looking at something almost universally acknowledged, even if not always consciously or directly, as being central to our humanity. Somewhere in this all-encompassing whole is, necessarily, as much powerful potential for the debasement of a life as there is for its fulfillment. This shapeless, nameless thing the old boy calls Dao, and which we sometimes endow with the name of a God, has a reality and a strength we cannot deny; and for some, its investigation may be fraught with peril. For us, in a historical sense, the counterpart of unity with the bright image of the benevolent deity is something deeply rooted in our cultural heritage; possession by some dark and demonic force, which once found within, can only with difficulty be exorcised.

There is no need to resort to superstition here, for any twentieth century psychologist, equating ‘exorcism’ and ‘demonic possession’ to the practice of psychotherapy impulse should be all in a day’s work. Although the vocabulary of the inner experience may have changed substantially, the reality of the human condition is the same as it ever was. The demons and dark forces of our western mythologies have never left us; but now they are known as ‘neuroses’, ‘complexes’ and ‘psychological trauma’. **Cite Jung**

So what is the difference between psychic healing through therapy and reaching for completion in the all-encompassing Dao? Or perhaps surrendering to the mercy of a divine being? The old boy is giving us a metaphorical shrug here and saying, ‘does it really matter?’ The Dao is a great journey with a multitude of ways. We are all free to choose a route or no route at all…



Looking beyond the obvious evidence of what a legion of theologians and philosophers have been telling us for centuries, there is now emerging the beginnings of a scientific acceptance of the hazy realms of paradox and confusion. We now have the uncertainty principle, chaos theory, notions of multiple dimensions in string theory and the inexplicable behaviour of quanta as examples to support the notion of things vague at the limits of all scientific knowledge and experience.

No matter which scientific and empirical branch of knowledge any researcher may care to explore, and no matter how certain and conclusive the core of that discipline may be; somewhere at the outer edge is a fuzzy area where things become inexplicit and theories start to melt into each other. This is the place where physics rubs shoulders with metaphysics with an ease that might upset minds raised on the maxim that an irrational conceptualisation cannot be held as significant.

The 'something' that intimates the beginning of this unknown territory is the first glimpse of the essence that the old man simply calls the 'Dao'. This idea, as we have already discussed, has a multitude of interpretations and associations; it can be the way, the Godhead, the supreme mystery and the source. It is the unity of all opposites, the encompassing whole, and the greater good. It is at once the vital inner essence of the soul and the concept of universal being — whether deified or not. Whatever else it may be, argues the old boy, it is the embodiment of the natural flow of both rational and irrational events, and opposing it is like opposing the wind, the tide or the onset of darkness at night.

Since we have already confessed to a lack of appropriate language to fully describe the Dao, one way we can attempt to obtain some kind of perspective is to employ the jargon of specialists in other areas; and this is something we have done already done in (for example) equating possession by demons to mental disturbance requiring psychotherapeutic intervention. In this respect, some interesting comparisons with the old boy’s 'manifold gateway' and 'crux of all mystery, can be made by references to contemporary thinkers as diverse as Jean Paul Sartre and Carl Jung. They may seem odd companions for the old boy in a clarification of ancient Daoist values, but Jung in particular was keenly interested in, and wrote extensively on, eastern philosophy. Furthermore, in his psychological work, he parallels a fundamental precept of Lao Zi’s in always staunchly maintaining that the irrational unknown has just as much right to serious consideration as the rational known. Essentially, Jung is a humanitarian philosopher who interprets individual experience in terms of an all-inclusive viewpoint; Jung is 'big picture' by nature. He was also a friend and occasional scholarly collaborator of noted Sinologist (and by far the most credible translator of the *I Ching*),Richard Wilhelm.

For Jung, the mysterious ultimate source we characterize here as the Dao, found its resonance in the unplumbed depths of the collective unconscious. In addition, for Jung as for Lao Tzu, the greater good is *always* a product of individual rather than group effort. This is important. It is not that the principles of the Dao do not hold true for organisations, they do, they apply to corporate enterprise large and small; and even to the sovereign state itself. But, the integration of the whole comes *only* from within an individual. Putting a number of disintegrated individuals together cannot make an integrated whole; this would be like trying to form one good bottle from the shattered remnants of several. In his lectures given in Cologne and Essen in 1933 Jung illustrates this by speaking of:

…the individual man, on whose sense of responsibility everything valuable in mankind ultimately depends. The mass as such is always anonymous and always irresponsible… [[6]](#footnote-6)

Similarly, his psychological description of the self-focused intuition the old boy calls ‘work on the self’ is very strongly reminiscent of Lao Zispeaking of the Dao:

Small and hidden is the door that leads inward, and the entrance is barred by countless prejudices, mistaken assumptions, and fear…[[7]](#footnote-7)



The work of Jean Paul Sartre is another extraordinarily useful resource in interpreting Lao Zi, especially when it comes to really getting a feel for what it means to grapple with the concept of a mysterious 'other', even including the unknown 'whole' of the Dao itself. Sartre even uses some of the same terms as the old man, including the concept of 'that which cannot be named'. Despite the fact that the purpose and thrust of his work is to show how consciousness operates for the individual in the world, his rational insights extend well into the fuzzy area most people would consider esoteric; and right into the mind-bending concept of nothingness itself.

Just as does the old boy; Sartre traverses unfamiliar regions of the soul.

Sartre's ‘nothingness’ is (extremely!) literally 'no thing'. **Cite here** But, how does a concept like 'nothing' even arise in the first place? After all, everything that can be named is a *something,* even 'the nameless' is *called* 'the nameless'. The word 'nothing' itself, being a word, apparently defies itself in the naming to become 'something', ‘emptiness’ is still ‘something’ and so are ‘blank’ and ‘vacuum’… The mental gymnastics needed to comprehend these statements are something that is necessary here. A nothing cannot be referred to as an 'itself; strictly, it cannot be referred to at all, without the 'it' becoming something. Yet the idea, the concept remains and is familiar to all despite the difficulty in knowing how it might ever arise. How do you detect a nothing when the absence of anything still leaves something?

Since there is nowhere in the world, and logically for that matter, no place in the entire physical universe for a 'nothing' to hide, Sartre concludes that 'nothingness' is hidden deep in the heart of every individual being. It is in our consciousness , and is only, but always — present there.

Considering Sartre's nothingness is like studying the impossible mechanics of an Escher print, or perhaps blinking incredulously at one of those pictures of the kind that trick the eye into first seeing a vase and then two faces staring at each other. The brain is forced into unfamiliar patterns of recognition. Take, for instance, these lines:

Nothing can keep me from success.

Nothing can prevent me from being happy.

There is nothing to fear.

This seems at first sight a positive message of buoyant affirmation, full of confidence that the individual can overcome. Now, *read the lines again*, but this time think of that 'nothing' as the heart of darkness; an 'anti-thing', a lurking, vague and hostile impalpable presence with malevolent intent. When that menacing 'nothing' becomes real in the consciousness and is directly experienced, it is as though the world is suddenly turned on its head. *Now*, you can empathise with the child lying fearfully in the dark. *Now*, you know there really *is* *nothing* there to terrify you… *Nothing can* stop you now… *Nothing can* prevent you from fulfilment…

And suddenly, that buoyant affirmation becomes terror...

There is as much unlimited potential for pure evil in this vision of the unknown as there is for pure good. But, the old boy insists that embracing all means just that. In realisation of the possibilities lurking in the shadowy unknown lies the individual's path to freedom and control of their own destiny. Is it that nothing sets you free? Or that you set yourself free? Or are they the same? In any event you have *nothing* to lose…

Sartre's rather dark and pessimistic vision and the old man's image of the greater good seem poles apart; and in some respects they are. There is sense however in which they might also be considered the flip sides of the same coin. For Lao Zi the fulfilment of life lies in the striving by the individual for the unity of the one, for Sartre the emptiness of life derives from the severance of the individual from the unity of the one. In one sense they are the same. Just imagine yourself at any point on the 'Way'; understanding the Dao as a great journey. From anywhere on the way, it would be possible to empathise with either point of view by simply viewing the goal as drawing either ever-closer or ever-further away…

From the old boy's point of view, Sartre's bleak and desperate acknowledgment of the impossibility of personal fulfilment is simply that he is seeing the Dao receding in the rear-view mirror.

And one can always turn around...

My glass is half-full, or my glass is half-empty; it is all a matter of attitude.

2.

Humankind can define beauty, only because it also knows ugliness,

The world recognises good, only because there is evil.

Accordingly, the known and the unknown are natural partners.

The difficult and the easy become complementaries.

The long and short are always in contrast, and always together.

The high and the low depend on each other for meaning.

Voice and notes can together produce harmony.

Before and after each follow the other.

The wise know how to accept the contradictory union of opposites,

They do not try to capture the indefinable with words.

Through this acceptance an example of altruism is created.

A tolerance that embraces the vast complexity of the world.

It encourages the creative and is not stifled by the possessive.

It is a benefit for all, yet seeks no acclaim.

When important work is done without laying claim to merit,

The merit, though unclaimed, is always there.

Lao Ziis here establishing the syncretic bona fides of his thought. The Dao is the ‘all.’ There can be no half-measures here; the ultimate greater good must have room for everything and everyone. Remarkably, considering the simplicity of his expression, the old boy does succeed in framing his thoughts in the *Dao de Jing* in an all-inclusive way. A measure of this success can be taken in noting that the philosophy he outlines is generally equally acceptable to the liberal open-minded among Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and followers of other major and minor religions alike.

The old boy illustrates here the rather obvious precondition to any understanding of the Dao; that any connected 'whole' involves a reconciliation or union of antithetical elements, and much of what he has to say revolves around the ways and means of eradicating inner conflict. Before there is enlightenment, there is the absolute necessity to unite opposites and resolve disharmony. This may not however, require the mental sleight of hand of attempting to believe ‘six impossible things before breakfast’ **cite carroll here,** and certainly should not be accomplished by simply rejecting or ignoring factors that prove inconvenient or difficult to reconcile; since that would be to warp and twist the truth to the required end.

The real goal is to remove the dichotomy in the mind of the individual. There is a potentially major problem here, and much though the old boy might ridicule the strictness of our adherence to rational empiricism, we are all the products of our cultures. CG Jung for one, believed that no purely *rational* process could satisfactorily resolve two diametrically opposed beliefs and yet let them both stand[[8]](#footnote-8),but note that in saying this he does not preclude an 'intuitive' (for this read ‘non-rational’) leap towards integration. In his writings on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (T'ai I Chin Hua Tzung Chih), Jung indicates that possibly, the only answer to this impasse may be to 'grow out' of the limiting mind-set; to literally wait until the middle or later years of life before even attempting this kind of mental synthesis.

Jung was wise enough to know that even the most stubbornly concrete mindset might well develop some fluidity in the longer term, though he was perhaps, somewhat conservative in estimating both the time required, and the conditions necessary, to achieve this kind of maturity. Interestingly, there is anecdotal evidence that the great sage K’ung-fu-tse (Confucius) was of similar mind. According to a number of accounts of his life cite here he did not think himself ready to tackle the intricacies of the *I Ching* until he had reached the age of seventy, and had a lifetime of study to underpin his temerity in attempting this major work.

It appears from these accounts, that a genuine understanding of the deep meaning of the union of opposites requires a certain mental flexibility and maturity of understanding and is obviously not something we might expect to fall into our laps; at least not without some diligent prior 'work on the self'.

However, in reaching this apparent dead-end to our quest, we are once again at risk of overcomplicating the old boy. The metaphorical scowl on his expressive, white-bearded face is now accompanied by an impatient tapping of fingers on tabletop a she once again implores us: Listen to the message! The old boy tells us that while a certain humility concerning our own lack of maturity is necessary and appropriate, we should not become so self-deprecating as to underestimate our own potential for fulfilment.

The essence of the Dao remains available to all.

We should *never* let a perceived difficulty such as our own lack of wisdom or maturity stand in the way of the approach to the ultimate mysteries of the Dao. Benjamin Hof wrote a beautiful little book; *The Dao of Pooh* which perfectly illustrates this point. In the book he convincingly makes the case that Winnie the Pooh is in essence a Daoist master! And if the Bear of Little Brain can do it, there is hope yet for us all...[[9]](#footnote-9)

3.

By not glorifying high achievement, discontent is minimised.

By not flaunting wealth and luxury, crime is minimised.

All desire for the unattainable creates confusion and dissatisfaction.

So, a wise government fosters hearts empty of desire while filling bellies.

It keeps ambitions moderate, and bones strong.

When the people live in innocence, their needs are fewer,

Thoughts of something better will not disturb harmony.

The less action needs to be taken, the more order will prevail.

The old man has some very pragmatic advice for all governments, and he demonstrates his belief that the actions signifying proper pursuit of the greater good (work on the self) are pretty much the same from educated individual to supreme leader. Lao Zi sees the communities that form nations with a simplicity and clarity of vision we may find it hard to attune to in our overly politicised and factionalised age.

Having said this, it is likely however, that the gulf between the politics of today and those of 2,500 years ago is somewhat narrower than may be initially supposed. Yes, we live in an era in which many community leaders consider dishonesty as simply a tactic to be used if the outcome seems favourable; and, so did the old boy. We live in an era of widespread amorality and self-serving greed by public officials; and, so also did the old boy.

On seeing our modern PR agendas, information massaging, political propagandizing and spin-doctoring, the old boy would recognize the tactics as employed by public figures since time immemorial. He would probably sigh as the vociferously self-serving proponents of the rival theories of the day jostle and push for attention, and blatantly, bribe, persuade or cloud our viewpoint with *just* those facts *they* consider pertinent, while the disagreeable essentials are thrust out of sight and ignored. He would however, be totally familiar with the reality; politics has not changed that much in 2,500 years, politicians work at the interface of morality and dissolution - then as now. Ideally in following Lao Zi, one should first apply to any consideration of the proper workings of society some of those straightforward values that are the hallmarks of any honest individual search for unity and wholeness.

The Daoist principle of ‘least action’ is certainly applicable in the community and organizational context as well as the individual. The trick, in applying the old boy's thought to contemporary issues, is to separate the eternal principles which the old boy is concerned with, from the ephemeral principles that clutter our perception; i.e. not let the wood become obscured by the trees.

It must also be remembered that reconciliation, and integration of opposites in the old man’s worldview means seeking win-win situations everywhere. Repression, prejudice, intolerance, bias, ignorance, dogmatism, vengeance; all of these represent some form of denial and are indicators that real integrity has not, and will not, be achieved. Or at least not until reconciliation and its corresponding traits of tolerance and acceptance become the norm.

The old boy has a clear enough message here; if a society is created where ‘losers’ occupy every place from second downwards, what is also created is a massive potential for resentment and disharmony. Lao Zi advocates that people should be valued for what they *can* *do* rather than denigrated for what they *cannot* attain. This is the way of harmony and the greater good, people must feel safe and valued. Leaders of state also need to ensure that the modest aspirations of the majority are reflected in the modest aspirations of the governmental whole to avoid large-scale discontent.

The old boy is also telling us something ordinary people already knew, but corporations and government need continual reminders of: that natural justice should always prevail against the temptation to use the power of the state or corporate body for the benefit of a few. By this measure, any government that allows wealth and power to shift inexorably to a complacent elite will be priming the revolution that will inevitably bring about its own demise…

In the old boy's terms, harmony will be disturbed (for ordinary people) by thoughts of something better, but unattainable without power or influence. It is not that the old boy is advocating that ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ should both be eliminated as categories of being, society needs a degree of dynamic tension between wanting and receiving to stimulate progress. Everyone needs to know however, that a better life is both possible *and* attainable, and that they may strive towards fulfilling dreams of riches and material comforts if they wish; the old boy is about embracing these opposing ideals, not eradicating them.

Nonetheless, it needs to be remembered that society is a mirror to the whole and any misbegotten attempt by government towards a stable polarisation of humanity into 'haves' and 'not-haves' is a kind of imposed fragmentation; and *that* is something fundamentally in opposition to the principles of reconciliation and of unity of the Dao.

In his praise of innocence and the contentment of the simple life, it is not that the old boy is advocating that people should be deliberately kept in the dark; elsewhere he is strict enough in insisting on the individual's proactive acquisition of knowledge. What he is really warning against is the over-blown rhetoric and the pseudo-wisdom he labels as *'cleverness',* the kind of fashionable, truncated pieces of applied logic that find an adopted context way beyond their original limited scope and sweep through society to occasionally devastating effect.

Examples of 'cleverness' might include any area in which responsibility is evaded and excuses are made for not doing the 'right thing'. For example; governments redefining the care of the aged as a business opportunity; politicians who allow corporate lawyers to draft the legislation they are being paid to formulate; universities that prize financial ability over scholastic ability; hospitals prepared offer only a small subset of the available and or required services to the poor; individuals whose self-righteousness persuades them of the moral bankruptcy of the needy, and therefore absolves them from blame in allowing them to starve and etc; all of these abdications of responsibility which are so finely tuned in organisations in particular, are illustrations of the type of cleverness the old boy despises…

Understanding what the old boy really means by ‘cleverness’ is key to proper understanding the *Dao de Jing*. True wisdom, the big picture view, needs always to take into account conventional wisdom and its assumptions; and ‘conventional wisdom’ includes all the prevalent beliefs and ideas that motivate individuals, organisations and governments in regular cycles to foster the fashionable 'theories' and 'solutions' that engender widespread community support — albeit only for a while.

Some of these faddish propositions may be quite useful and positive in their effects, and some quite bad, but what differentiates and separates these passing ‘clever’ ideas from true wisdom and from the Dao, is their ambit. Without exception the fashionable trends in conventional thought fail to be holistic; they propose action based on some innovative analysis of what is *always* only a subset of the available data.

While it may be trendy to speak of thinking ‘laterally’ and consider ‘innovative solutions’; that are ‘outside the box’, it only takes a quick glance at governmental and corporate policies anywhere and everywhere to see that short-sighted Band-Aid solutions are not infrequently the order of the day.

It is unsurprising, given this critical failure of overall vision, that much conventional wisdom lacks (in practical application) the necessary scope to be fully comprehensive in answering the real need to be addressed. Like the medicine given to terminally ill patients, it eases the immediate pain; but provides no prospect of curing the malaise. In treating symptoms rather than causes, conventional wisdom is always eventually found lacking; as the old boy sees it; there is no integration with the ‘big picture’, no approach towards the Dao.

Consider for a moment a contemporary example of the type of wisdom that apparently offers big-picture solutions; the much-talked about cleverness of 'economic rationalism'. That is, rationalism based on consideration of market forces and driven by profit and loss forecasting. This model of capitalist society employs a limited subset (only what is logical/rational) of an already limited subset (the economic aspects of society) of the available data on society as a whole. The result is the kind of nonsense espoused by right-wing pundits and expressed in clichés such as; ‘What is good for business is good for the country!’ and ‘We need to apply the principles of business efficiency to social responsibilities such as coping with poor / homeless / disabled / law-breaking people…

Could this kind of niche thinking embody some universally applicable truth? The old boy would have frowned and walked away quietly and had nothing further to do with this inferior idea. By limiting the 'rationalism' to economic considerations; then worse by deliberating excluding and denying the legitimacy of any other consideration of people's needs, wants and feelings; the bigger picture is forever excluded and the whole thereby denied. There is no fulfilment, no unity, and the Dao remains unattainable. *This* is the kind of thinking Lao Zi derides as being only 'cleverness.'

‘Cleverness’ is not just the ill-conceived idea or mistaken notion that has found some place to take root and grow in society. Some ‘cleverness’ is deeply ingrained in our cultural fabric and some of these entrenched ideas are dangerous. The old boy lived in an age when a ruler's whim could make or break an individual. Today, the element of chance is still a significant limiting factor in any search for ultimate truth. One need only take a look (for example) at what happens to whistle-blowers in our western societies to see how capricious the search for truth can be; though these whistle-blowers may be generally acknowledged as principled and moral people, working towards the greater good. Though they may be idolised by the masses, and feted by the media, their fate at the hands of government is uncertain at best and terrible at worst. Cite here Snowden, Assange etc The old boy is very aware that individuals are frequently at the mercy of fate, often in the guise of some limiting condition placed upon them by their own capricious social institutions.

The choices are stark if the social situation is not to spiral out of control, the old boy sees the problem, and it lies with every individual; for that is where the impetus towards the Dao resides. Our organisations are blunt amoral tools and corporate responsibility is but a legal fiction, a ‘cleverness’ designed to minimize liability and appease the pangs of guilt in the responsible individuals. Without individual responsibility for the actions of corporate institutions, right up to and including the state itself; we are at something of an impasse.

If our corporate bodies are promoting ill-conceived solutions, our quality of life suffers. If they behave unjustly and immorally; we are tainted as well. And as long as we maintain the comfortable fiction that the corporate entities *we* are members of are *really entities* and somehow separate from *us*, we implicitly accept they are capable of taking the blame *we* should be shouldering. In this way, we remain in denial of any true reconciliation of our reality.

Then, as all possibility of genuine reconciliation and integration in the unity of the whole fails, the Dao fades ever more from view…

4.

In the unity of the whole, is a vessel which use cannot drain.

The boundless source of the known — and everything denied.

It is sharpness and its blunting, A knot and the means to untangle it,

A glare that softens and fades until only dimly realised.

Where it comes from may not be known.

But from it the highest essence may arise.

When considering the import of Lao Zi's words, even a person of agnostic or atheistic tendency might benefit from revisiting any religious teachings they may have received in early education. The great Dao, the way, unity, and Godhead, supreme mystery, unknown, nothingness; is a journey into self-knowledge. In the west this finding and uniting process can only really be expressed for many by means of the vocabulary of religious experience. Like the old man himself, we falter at the outer edge of the capabilities of language. Sartre was uncompromising in his atheism, yet in the end his non-being looks; even to an agnostic with distinctly atheistic tendencies like me; more like the Godhead receding in rear-view vision than no God at all.

The Dao belongs to a class of universal experiences. All the religions of the world and according to Jung at least, all those words that end in 'ism' are types of potential spiritual quest and substitutes for genuine religious experience[[10]](#footnote-10). That means socialism, nihilism, feminism, capitalism, chauvinism, existentialism, communism, hedonism, capitalism, Buddhism, and at the risk of being frivolous; even jingoism, priapism and recidivism are all variants on, or diversions from, the job the old boy would call 'work on yourself.'

Although ‘isms’ are substitutes for the eternal whole and can consume the energy that might rightfully be applied to spiritual growth, they are, like conventional wisdom, sub-sets of that absolute totality and insufficient in themselves to embrace absolute concepts.[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, rationalism is itself a rejection of the irrational and, valuable though it is, is not all-inclusive and therefore inadequate to define or in any real sense grasp, the essence that is Dao.

Sartre's preferred 'ism' and the personal commitment *he* chose in rejecting a deity (and perhaps ultimately the possibility of any kind of unity) was Marxism; but the *Dao de Jing* says that the ways are many, and neither harsh judgment nor complacency should be occasioned by the personal pathways others find opportune. Lao Zi encourages people to look within themselves to find the way. Enlightenment is frequently not found in the most likely places, and there are no guarantees that the path rejected or inappropriate to one is not the perfect way for someone else.

It is because of the complexity and confusion in traditional religion and the consequent proliferation of sect, sub-sect and 'ism' type religious substitutes that the simple lucidity of 'work on yourself' becomes such an attraction. This is where the directness and accessibility of the old boy’s teachings really excel. The truth is that we; meaning that broad swathe of the peoples of the contemporary 'west' of civilization; carry the baggage of generations of complex philosophic and semantic overlays to our perception. This may sometimes cloud and perhaps sometimes confuse our discernment of the real and actual. The ideas of the great thinkers can in practice be just one more inexplicable maze we must navigate; and *their* signposts point in every direction.

It is little wonder that in every culture, thinking individuals often turn with relief from the fragmented disarray of organised religion, and spiritual matters generally, towards what science offers us by way of proof and cold, hard fact.

Yet, in turning by degrees towards the substantive, rational and scientific, the old boy would caution that we turn also towards imbalance and a potential spiritual vacuum. It is a crisis of insufficiency, of alienation and separation that leaves many with a feeling of loss or disorientation in the chaos of the world. In adopting this purely factual orientation we risk losing the simplicity of outlook that is the hallmark of the genuine seeker of truth in the Lao Zi tradition. When we demand proof and reject our own intuition, then we lose the capacity for acceptance. To progress, we need to somehow wipe the slate clean.

‘Alienation’ means estrangement and emotional distance. It arises as a consequence of the separation of the individual from the entire realm of the spiritual. It can be considered, in its essence, as a form of entrapment by the material. The old boy would call alienation a limiting factor on the way to enlightenment, and a form of extremism, despite it being somewhere not that far from the norm in latter day European society.

Alienation-as-separation arises as a consequence of a refusal to accept, consider, or admit that anything important or worthwhile exists beyond the defining realms of factual scientific theory and rationalism as they are personally experienced. Instead of looking for the shape of the whole, we draw a set of defining lines bound by what is known and proven, and attempt to fit the whole into the box we have created; the impossible final triumph of rationalism.

The search for a mysterious 'other' is denied in this process; and yet some hidden validation of self and life is a universal quality associated with the fulfilment of individual potential throughout all of history. Alienated people feel a *lack* of *something*. This 'something' is *not* just a matter of personally accepting or rejecting a particular divinity or mode of religious expression — this is a rejection of the spiritual life itself; an attempted repression of an omnipresent facet of human experience.

The fact of being an orthodox believer or non-believer of a particular persuasion is not important in the 'big picture' scheme of things; hence the proliferation of 'isms' for the diversion of agnostics and atheists. The point here is that despite their denial of any traditional God, even avowed atheists must generally still seek *some* outlet for the spiritual impulse. Just as the denial of spirituality leads to alienation and the diminution of the individual, so the converse is true; *any* kind of spiritual commitment empowers the individual with meaning in life, and gives a sense of both personal strength and personal focus. Commitment in the spiritual sense is the equivalent of a storm-anchor; and those people driven by purely material issues are in a real sense cast adrift and vulnerable. Whether they realise this or not, they become prone to the discontents of those whose belief has failed, or become irrelevant to them.

They are separated from the totality of their being — alienated.

How does this come about? The Dao, wholeness, completeness of being, need not be associated with any form of religious observance or divine presence and yet is frequently and almost inevitably equated with God in our western thought. Because traditionally in our culture this essence; the Godhead, is *our* mysterious other. It should be said that a sole focus on the material aspects of life removes us as surely from the Dao as it does from any traditional divinity. Dao and the Godhead both represent ultimate unity, integration and fulfilment in the whole.

In Jungian terms, spiritual meanings and principles are realised internally or not at all, an externalised spiritual ideal turns to superstition and irrelevance very quickly.[[12]](#footnote-12) This, according to Jung, is the calamity that has struck western society so hard in the last few generations; the idea of God as an independent entity sitting in judgment has taken hold. Many people have swapped the 'God within' for an externalised 'God the father' in some mystical 'heaven' which is not part of the self. This is against all good advice from theologians who well know the dangers; absent Gods become superfluous in fairly short order.

If the concept of a 'divine being' is to be the means of the unity of the whole, then people need to see, hear and feel their almighty leader in the most direct and personal way. Hearsay simply will not do; and yet, for most at this point in history, it must suffice. So, a large section of contemporary western society has simply ceased being spiritually involved in their traditional religions in any meaningful way. When human beings substitute the empty forms of ritual for authentic religious experience something vital dies; the imitation of Christ is no substitute for the direct revelation of the innermost mystery.

Lao Tzu's message is strongly independent and eclectic, and as usual, the old boy cuts to the heart of the matter with uncanny ease and simplicity. To the perpetuators of form and ritual, he would say that it really does not matter whether you believe, or do not believe in a supreme or divine being. In his own era, the distinction between supreme state leader and Godhead was blurred to say the least. However, what is certain is that the individual who, with a shrug of the shoulders, places their fate in the lap of the Gods — has ceased work on the self.

The old boy will tell you that fatalistic belief in an external divinity is just a way of avoiding personal responsibility; an abdication from personal attainment of all the potential of life. In this situation the individual loses sight of the Dao.

Early Christian thinkers were also keenly aware of this problem when they asserted that 'God helps those who help themselves', perhaps few who have heard this precept quite realise just how vital it is; it is the difference between the potential for total fulfilment and abysmal failure.

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Alienation of the spirit is widely experienced by its casualties as a kind of dulling of the senses and lack of belonging, an inability to ignite that first essential spark of motivation. The individual is blasé, world-weary, cynical and detached. The problem is one of maintaining the individual's engagement with the ideal; keeping the spiritual quest fresh, vital and personal. Ideally, what is required at the outset of any great journey towards the Dao is a sense of awe; and alienation brings its exact opposite, a vast ennui...

To be fair, a proper sense of innocent awe is not easy to inspire in our high-tech, media-rich times, while the solemnity of high mass in a cavernous, vaulted cathedral may well have struck wonder into the average citizen in the middle ages, as a spectacle today, its capacity even to impress, much less overawe, is gravely diminished. It is little wonder that new-age churches and cults galore employ theatrical spectacle, charismatic leaders, group incantation, and devices as various as laser light shows, rock 'n roll bands and hypnotic trance to maintain the participation of their congregations; people need the inspiration of awe...

The end of work on the self, and the end of any approach towards fulfilment, really sets in when a person; or even an entire religious order, becomes hidebound and fossilised by tradition and ritual. For the organised religion this circumstance means decay, and failure of the fundamental priestly duty; which is to maintain the interface between the ordinary person and the possibility of the whole, divine, Godhead, Dao... Like many a bureaucracy before them, failing religious institutions have yielded to the temptation of allowing a panel of 'experts'; the theologians and other advance guard of the hierarchy, to dictate the terms of participation to the ordinary person. Because of this institutional weakness, many individuals are stuck with a supreme being that is somehow external and distant to the self, and one local 'hotline' to the spiritual is closed.

Lao Zi presents a way out of the quandary. The old boy says simply; stop complicating the issue and start work on yourself. This is all that is necessary, and the means to start and finish the job are all immediately on hand. All you have to do in commencement is start to use that peripheral mental vision you already have, open your mind and begin to resolve the conflicts.

Of course he doesn't promise us an easy trip…

5.

Heaven and earth are uncompromising,

For them, each living thing is superfluous once its purpose is served.

The wise are also uncompromising,

For them no individual is vital to the whole.

The unknown is a space central to heaven and earth — like a bellows,

It appears empty — yet is inexhaustible,

It changes shape to create something from nothing,

In moving, it creates and it yields.

From it we learn that more words might mean less.

And to hold fast to the central unknown that may yet have a use.

What separates humanity from all of nature? Nothing; and we should know by now that this can be a terrifying notion. The distance between humanity and nature is one of the inimical polarisations of thought requiring reconciliation in work on the self. Any person embarking on this work is severely disadvantaged should they acquire an exaggerated perception of their own extra-ordinariness or worthiness.

The work has all been done before, and it will all be done again. The person who does this work *now* is not joining some exclusive elite, but simply working towards realising their intrinsic potential *as they should*. Should *you* fail in this process of attaining fulfilment and enlightenment, should *I* fail; life will go on. The great ebb and flow is a natural process in which all things find their place for a while, but *nothing* is forever and the vast cycle continues to embrace all possibilities…

Work on the self is also not just a matter of achieving some synthetic union of opposites. The old boy is telling us that, the next step in understanding is knowing that everything *springs* from its opposite. Something comes from nothing, order from chaos, good from bad, man from woman, light from darkness, elation from despair. The old boy is so sensitive to these changes and so aware of them as a continuing process, that in his terms (as for any serious seeker of the Dao) the night begins at noon; at the precise instant the power of the day reaches its peak and begins to fade. This is the moment the power of the night asserts itself, and *not* the onset of darkness, which only happens after the power of the day has been steadily waning for many hours.

Jung called this phenomenon, by which things turn into their opposites 'enantiodromia'. Thus, for individuals, love may become hate, laughter turns to tears, anger turns to tolerance/indifference, and passion becomes apathy. There are much broader issues of reciprocation and cyclic change here for society as well; as governments, corporations, institutions and supreme leaders are prone to radicalise or lose their purpose by simply drifting away from their foundations. If the Dao can be said to have a place, then that place is the middle ground; when, by the inexorable process of enantiodromia the middle ground is lost, then the Dao fades from sight and the greater good is unachievable.

The old boy continually warns us that this process of metamorphosis is happening and we need to accept conscious responsibility for self-orientation in the chaos, indeed we generally all admit rationally that 'change is inevitable', but we do not always plumb the depths of what these small incremental changes are actually doing to us; to our personalities, our society, our beliefs, our notions of right, wrong, friendship, family, patriotism...

Consider the impact of this ebb and flow of change in the environmental context of corporations and associations, institutions and states. Enantiodromia here can be the tendency for education to become propaganda; and a tool to stifle any real learning. In similar fashion, the law can be exercised in *preventing* justice from being upheld, and police powers can be perverted to the organised repression of ordinary decent, people for the protection of powerful criminals. An army can be used in terrorising and subduing the people they were supposed to defend (indeed perhaps most do so!). Even medical knowledge can be subverted to harmful means; for example in the deliberate development of toxins as weapons, or the false imprisonment on medical grounds of the political enemies of the state.

All of the horrors detailed above have happened before and will no doubt happen again. Rational process *can* justify inhumane acts. Hence, it is no overstatement to repeat an assertion previously made; pure rationalism without a balancing human appreciation of spiritual wants, fears, and needs is itself a form of radicalism that leads away from the Dao. It denies an essential part of the human experience, and therefore any possibility of the integration of the whole. The old boy would put it more simply; logic and good intentions are *not* enough.

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There is a constant cycling and shift of emphasis in any striving towards the greater good and both individuals and groups need to be finely attuned to this flow or risk being rashly opposed to it. Individuals more especially need this awareness, since individuals are the conscience of institutions, and must in the end, be responsible for group actions. This is why it is something of a fundamental injunction of the old boy's to refuse to take things at face value and to frequently re-evaluate the truth of any given situation; even to the point of examining even the prescriptive function of the language used to *describe* the situation. To take a firm stand on *anything* and fail to re-evaluate in the light of altered circumstances is to be inflexible, and to cease to admit that change is a component of the ultimate whole.

Change is always - and forever - central to the ideal of unity. It is no accident that the other best known work in the Daoist philosophic canon is the *I Ching:*  *'The Book of Changes'*. The Dao is the pure constant; yes, that is true. But of course, in keeping with its paradoxical nature, it is also the embodiment of all change and impermanence.

Another consideration for the soul-searching whole-seeker on this highest quest of all; is that an aura of positive affirmation *must* pervade the quest for ultimate integration. The mind-set of the true pilgrim is flexibility, determination, humility and honesty. The old boy would add that it is also wise to remember from time to time that even honest soul-searching may turn to self-deception, unless there is frequent and uncompromising self-review…

6.

The spirit of the valley is timeless.

It is mother, earth, woman.

She is the first beginning of all that is.

Though the importance of first beginnings is barely noticed,

Their relevance never fails.

7.

Heaven and earth are timeless.

Being unborn, they are eternal.

Knowing this, the wise put themselves last, yet they come first.

They are detached, and therefore become as one.

Having no thought for themselves, they are fulfilled.

Understanding comes from the ground up and is intuitively felt as well as reasoned, that is; *if it is fully realised* and integrated within the self. But the method or process by which this understanding is achieved is not critical, providing a few important small observances are made, including accepting that a process of rational self-analysis, while perhaps laudable, is insufficient in itself. The old boy tells us that it does not really matter how you assess your reality providing your endeavour is honest and thorough; though the question remains; how do you start?

European cultural tradition accustoms each educated individual to exam and break down the various elements that constitute our world along some traditional analytical lines of cleavage. The established methods of perception are those favoured by science, which have produced a number of familiar dichotomies, for example; cause and effect, subject and object, known and unknown, compare and contrast, logic versus emotion.

These ideas, all of which point towards a possible unity in the whole through reconciliation of opposites, are simply scientific-logical ways of examining wholeness; how to cut the cake of reality. They are all variations on the theme of discernment of the natural order; actuality if you will. And, as the old man sees it, the methodology is not critical; anyway you divide the cake, it still tastes the same.

So, when seeking to penetrate the mysteries of the greater good, one should probably start the journey simply, with those things that are personally and closely experienced. The old boy advises that this is a search that must begin with a readiness for full acceptance and realisation of things unknown and enduring. On the way, we are all required to shift focus from time to time and consciously return to those areas of experience in which we have found no answers before. To seek the unity of the whole is to re-examine, first principles and undertake a fundamental appraisal of the fundamentals previously taken for granted, sometimes, it is in the most central and apparently obvious that enlightenment lies.

In eastern literature and tradition 'yin' is a symbolic first principle. It stands for earth, mystery, darkness, the feminine, motherhood, fertility, stability, devotion and everything that is solid and basic. It exemplifies the chaos out of which order comes, and the energy of one who can both disengage from mundane reality and embrace conflicting principles.

By contrast, the 'yang' principle stands for heaven, lightness, strength, masculinity, fatherhood, creativity, success, power and all that can be actualised. It epitomises the, tireless dynamism of the person who will not accept anything inferior, corrupted, or less than the whole. When you look carefully, these are the same primal elements humanity has always had to deal with. Naturally, (the old boy says) they spring one from the other and as the yang peaks, the yin gains ascendance and vice-versa.

Like subject and object, or cause and effect, the yin-yang line of dichotomy is simply another analytical tool to be used in a personal realisation of the whole. The old boy is giving us the clearest picture he can of the universal ebb and flow he is inviting us to ponder, but in the knowledge that the Dao as great journey is always, and forever, a unique and personal pilgrimage. You cannot simply adopt some other person's enlightenment; though you are certainly free to seek an example or inspiration in the methods of another.

Eventually, however the Dao is approached, the real work is there for *you* to do, and only you to do.

8.

The highest good is like water.

It nurtures all of life — yet makes no effort.

It flows to the undermost easily and without distinction or judgement.

In our home life, the place is the essential quality,

In our thoughts it is depth.

In our dealings with others it is kindness,

In our speech it is integrity,

In our judgment it is justice,

In our business it is competence,

But in our actions — it is the timing that counts.

Where there is no confrontation — there can be no condemnation.

My grandmother had a way of summing up any adverse situation she encountered in life in terms that would have been perfectly acceptable to a Daoist master twenty-six centuries ago. Her character, moulded as it was by a lifetime of toil, was not especially unusual, almost everyone eventually runs across a pragmatic disposition like hers; but she *was* living proof that a formal education and a wealth of factual knowledge are not the first prerequisites for wisdom.

Two world wars, a global depression, the demands of raising a family and the pressures of earning a living from unskilled labour during the bleak austerity years of early 20th century England honed grandmother’s personal survival techniques to a fine edge; and their simplicity in everyday application almost succeeded in disguising their devastating effectiveness.

When adversity struck, her frail presence steadfastly refused to wilt under any degree of pressure; although her only apparent defence was the expression of the hopeful notion that there is 'always something beneficial to be gained from even the most catastrophic of events'. At its most positive, the sentiment was the assertion that: "There is nothing so bad that good can't come of it." At its most wistful, the phrasing became the almost pleading: "Perhaps it's all for the best in the long run..."

What was it that made her a rock and gave her affinity with the Daoist masters of ancient renown? Her matter-of-fact acceptance of the reality of her situation was the first clue. Then, there was the way she adapted to the ebb and flow of great events without consuming her energy in opposing the unopposable. She was a dependable and immovable anchor for her family. Her indomitable nature overcame physical frailty and gave her personal presence and substance, despite the fact that her whole life was a tumultuous surf-ride down the giant breaking wave of 20th century change. From the era of the horse and carriage, gaslights and silent movies, to jet travel, computers and lunar missions, she saw it all.

Along the way she saw the motor vehicle take over the urban landscape, tuned to early radio (and later television), and saw the world develop both weapons of mass destruction and the medical technology to save lives. She learned that the only thing certain in life is that nothing stays the same. Today’s curse might be tomorrows blessing and the reverse was probably true as well. You accepted your lot, hoped and looked for the best possible outcome, and through it all, life continued, and was as good as you made it…

The idea that concepts like 'good' and 'bad' might have shifting definitions was not something that appealed to *me* at ten years old. The demarcation lines were quite clear to me with no grey areas to confuse the issue, bad engenders worse and good gets better. The two were as different and as irreconcilable as night and day, black and white, and cold and heat.

Years later, and now that I am no longer so confident that I can always clearly separate all that is good from all that is bad; I can still remember my absolute certainty at ten. Some perception that was previously concrete and unbending is now fluid and yielding. The question the old boy would ask with a grin is this; have I learned something, or have I forgotten something here?

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Trouble, conflict, blockage, frustration, wasted energy; the very idea of opposition in general; all of these negatives arise when the individual is not fully and properly engaged with the world. When *anyone* fights against the natural course of events, that person is the loser. In Sartre's terms, 'nothing' has come between the self and world; yet a shadow has fallen. Somehow a person is distracted and gets out of tune with nature; this person has drifted away from the Dao as a great journey, and accepted something less than the whole. The consequence is a lot of vitality wasted and a great deal of distraction and contention.

Here, the old boy is directing those troubled souls who have reached this impasse to take a look at the environmental factors that count. The message from Lao Zi as ever is; unblock the view, strip away the inconsequential clutter from the mind and abandon confusion by the straightforward process of focusing on what is unpretentious and worthy. From this modest beginning the path to understanding and harmony becomes easier as the natural flow of life is reasserted.

Everything has a price however, and the easy vegetative comforts of the sedentary intellect are lost to the soul-searcher engaged in reconciliation of fundamental principles. In Sartre's terms the reality can be a harsh one; once awakened to the possibility of Dao, they must embrace the whole or, if like Sartre they engage in any intellectual rejection of the possibility of integration, they are condemned to be free; cut adrift in a literal sense from all comforts and unable to consciously retreat back into the vacuity of a life lived before this new awareness without a profound feeling of self-loss.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, the old boy would simply snort at the idea of anyone nurturing this kind of sense of dispossession, or considering this to be in some way an undeserved loss of innocence.

Illusion is always and only that; why treasure it when the truth is also available?

9.

The vessel that is brimful is in danger of spilling.

The finely-honed blade is easiest to blunt.

The greatest treasures are a burden to those who guard them.

Those who seek great wealth and position court disaster.

To step down quietly when the task is finished,

Is the way of greatest good.

10.

Knowing you are both body and soul,

Can you avoid separation and attain unity?

Can you by an act of mind alone,

Become as supple as a newborn babe?

Can you clean and polish the mirror of your insight,

And make that vision perfect?

Can you, caring and taking responsibility for all,

Avoid wrong action by disregarding knowledge that poses as wisdom?

Can you, by your understanding, openness and acceptance,

Be as the receptive valley spirit, the primal she?

Can you, in the breadth of your knowledge and wholeness,

Still feel that you know nothing and should do nothing?

Life without claim of possession,

Nurture without need of gratitude.

Leading, but not dominating,

This is the highest good.

It is no mistake that peace and serenity are universally equated with 'centring'. In politics, the centre is always the place the moderates are found. In law and diplomacy all compromise is found in the middle ground. Accord and harmony are characteristics of the centre while all radicalism and excess is a movement towards an extreme. The place of the Dao is at the centre, but it is necessary to know of, and attune to the extremes and reconcile the opposites before this centre is reached.

The old boy continually stresses the virtue of 'just enough and no more' because he knows that one of the most prevalent and dangerous opponents of the unity of the whole through Dao, is radical excess. If any person should adopt an intolerant radical viewpoint, then Lao Tzu's prescription for the fulfilled life simply will not apply for them. Work on the self involves a keen appreciation of the concept of moderation in all things. The capacity to seek inner truth needs an open mind and a vigilant internal vision. These personal qualities will need to be well-nurtured, as they will be tested to the full.

In the broader context of corporate and international relations, what pits two groups, or two nations, against each other is simply the undue influence of their respective radical elements on their moderate centres. On this greater scale, when we value freedom of speech and expression; by the process of enantiodromia, we inevitably also give free rein to the inimical forces that seek our own corruption and downfall. In doing this we can be caught by our own principles, the greater good is forever prevented by failing in reconciliation of society's extremes...

Since we cannot use force in this predicament, persuasion is called for, and it must be convincing. This situation often arises as a result of a failure in education and may therefore become a multi-generational problem, tolerance is a two-edged sword...

Tolerance is the learned capacity of empathy with another viewpoint and is a key requirement of social relations that precedes any serious spiritual realisation by the individual. The abolition of intolerance is not something likely to be easily and quickly effected in any society in which it is endemic, but it needs to be addressed, as it does represent serious blockage on the 'way,' the Dao as a great journey.

Intolerance revolves around a rigid adherence to a set of essential principles; usually precepts that most members of society find either dissonant or onerous; intolerant persons and institutions jealously guard principles most people regard as too far from the mean; and rooted in an uncompromising black and white understanding of the world. Intolerance generally rejects innovation, and is therefore a form of fundamentalism; and fundamentalism of any kind is an extreme position that will always prevent progress.

The difficulty is that intolerant, fundamentalist views generally cannot be reconciled readily since their viewpoints cannot be argued by intellect alone; a much more difficult *re-alignment of faith* is essential. This is because fundamentalism is an 'ism' – substitute for the godhead or the Dao, and the proponents of fundamentalism have generally made 'the leap of faith' that makes this extreme position their central reality. Nevertheless, if civilised behaviour is to prevail, fundamentalists *must* be discredited in the eyes of the majority *and* have their viewpoints rendered impotent before any further work on unity can proceed.

In essence, all forms of religious fundamentalism and the glittery-eyed fanaticism it fosters are a perversion of the wisdom espoused by theologians of the Mosaic tradition, and certainly a perversion of the Way; the Dao as great journey. Although the required ‘leap of faith’ is made by all fundamentalists and the spiritual commitment to the cause may be a powerful force, a true apprehension of unity in the whole is replaced by an unnatural stasis; the crucial importance of change is denied. The fundamentalist takes a quick snap-shot of a supposed golden-era and attempts to freeze society at this moment in time for all eternity. The cyclic nature of an ever-changing reality goes unacknowledged by fundamentalists and a movement that may well have begun as the fresh revelation of a pure clean vision, stagnates and becomes irrelevant dogma. In the old boy's terms, fundamentalists have lost the primal receptiveness of the 'spirit in the valley'; they are in denial of the feminine principle of 'yin'

Fundamentalists have a tendency toward theocracy as the favoured mode of government and to the promotion of laws based on a strict interpretation of the scriptures. Unfortunately, theocracy is not a mode of government renowned for either progressive liberal policy or enlightened treatment of its peoples; quite the reverse in fact. CG Jung **cite** is just one of several observers who have pointed out the sad fact that historically, *any* ruling elite which proclaims itself in the name of *any* divine being will invariably set to work to repress and terrify its peoples immediately[[14]](#footnote-14).

All the evidence from history is that governments with a 'divine mandate' are infinitely ruthless in seeking to exclude and discredit all opposing viewpoints. They have no compunction in using the cruellest and most ingenious instruments of torture, and far from promoting personal fulfilment; they invariably promote a set of rigid observances that stifle personal growth. Fundamentalist states, of whatever religious persuasion, innately oppose any variation from established rote; and they do it by domination and subjugation.

This is one reason why the old boy might justly remark that it is leadership without domination that leads towards the greater good. The truth is that in the reality of his own personal experience, he is much more likely to have witnessed the autocratic whims and excesses of the God-Emperor at first hand than the barbarity of the fundamentalists. In any event Lao Zi would say to those who seek to impose their dogma on others: Why bother? If a particular course appeals to you; take it, but do not then expect the rest of humanity to thank you, when you force *your* way on them…

11.

Thirty spokes share one hub.

At the centre, is the nothingness that makes it serviceable.

Mould the clay to make the pot,

The nothingness inside makes it useful.

Cut out the doors and windows to make a room,

The nothingness created makes the room functional.

When we get something from nothing,

Profit arises from what is there.

Utility arises from what is not there.

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For Jean-Paul Sartre, the individual's forced confrontation with the void of non-being is the ultimate apprehension of alienation and despair. Perception of nothingness in existentialist terms is the shadowy awareness of a dark underside to reality, something; though strictly it should be *some no-thing,* almost infinitesimally admitted into every consciousness. It is an uneasy realisation as Sartre acknowledges, drawing the parallel that it is like knowing there may be a maggot in the fruit you are eating.

Daoist doctrine has an encapsulating image for this being/non-being, attraction/repulsion duality; the circular yin-yang diagram denoting unity of all opposites in the whole:

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Here, at the heart of the intertwined opposites, black on white and white on black, is a tiny dot denoting the inner germ of the other is visible. It signifies enantiodromia and the cycle of change whereby things give birth to, and return to their opposites. The small dots represent the being at the heart of non-being, the chaos at the heart of unity, the nothing at the heart of something and the fullness that comes from emptiness.

The point of all this is that, firstly, from the unknown springs everything that is, or can be known. Secondly, that understanding comes from realisation and integration, not some purely rational process of absorption of fact. Consider some implications:

Nothing can frighten me.

Nothing can protect me.

Nothing can help me

Nothing can hurt me.

Which of these phrases reassures and which is threatening?

The old boy tells us that your answer depends on whether you are positively striving towards unity or negatively conscious of your distance away from it. The old boy also points out that the usefulness or serviceability of anything might equally depend on what is not present as what is actually there Edit required here, additional material from notes to be included.

12.

Vivid colours blind the eyes,

Voice and music assail the ears.

Varieties of taste assault the palate,

Riding and racing excite the mind.

Earthly pleasures lead one astray.

The wise person looks inside before becoming distracted by the senses,

And by doing this — can choose to let go.

13.

Favour and disgrace are both diversions.

The human body and tribulation are easy familiars.

What is meant by "Favour and disgrace are both diversions?"

One should not be too concerned by loss or gain.

When eminence becomes insignificant, acceptance prevails.

What is meant by "The human body and tribulation are familiars?"

Adversity is a human condition.

Only a lifeless body attracts no misfortune.

The wise, valuing humanity over all — can be trusted with all things.

The wise, loving humanity over all — earn custody of the world.

Jungian philosophy recognises that a 'conventional life'; the method of living of those who choose the constraints of respectable society over the daunting prospect of work on the self, is one alternative to the approach towards the Dao. And of course there remain a multiplicity of alternate paths that might also be taken. What must be accepted though (if it is even realised) is the inevitability that the possibility of wholeness has been forsaken for the material solace of the collective mode of life[[15]](#footnote-15). What must further be accepted is that for many, this will suffice.

Those who are neither overly impressed by material wealth nor easily distracted by the delights of earthly existence are those best suited to exercise leadership. The old boy would regard the phenomenon of ‘career’ politician and ‘career’ diplomat with some degree of suspicion and disdain, instinctively holding true to the old adage that leadership is best exercised by those who do not seek it. What becomes of ordinary people when their supreme leaders lack the dedication of true vocation? Might ‘career’ leaders be as often focused on their own material self as the greater good?

Lao Zi would have nothing of the pettiness that puts personal material wealth before the unification of the whole at any level. It should be remembered that when the old boy issues his advice on the conduct of a supreme leader, that advice is as applicable to the lowest citizen as it is to the those entrusted with the well-being of the state itself, the best leaders do not have any arcane knowledge regarding the special nature of leadership; they are simply good people doing their best, and leadership is something any individual in honest approach to the Dao might undertake.

In addition, the precepts of Dao as great journey, while valuing moderation, nevertheless do not suggest that life cannot be lived with enthusiasm and to the full. The old boy does not shrink away from life, for him the Dao is warmth and humanity; he addresses himself to the great leader in the full knowledge and expectation that *any* person rightly advancing on the path of Dao as great journey might be suitable to fulfil that paramount role.

The old boy's commitment to life is open, generous and wholehearted, but he is never overwhelmed or confused by the trivia of day-to-day events. This is not to say that he is aloof from celebration, tragedy and the concerns of humanity. What does underlie his experience of the richness of life is his appreciation of context; the 'big picture' and exactly what it is that constitutes a good and proper life for everyone from ordinary person to supreme leader.

Those who are judged as the greatest of leaders need the grandest, most all-encompassing vision. As might be expected from the old boy, his ideal supreme leader is *not* first and foremost an economist, a diplomat, a politician, a military tactician, or a brilliant scholar. The old boy's consummate supreme leader has true 'big-picture' vision, a practical focus and a humanitarian outlook untainted by arrogance and pride. These attributes are backed by the passion and commitment that accompanies true dedication, and quite possibly, a disregard for self that might border on personal neglect. In other words, an individual who is also an honest seeker of the ultimate unity of the Dao...

The important element in leadership the old boy is telling us, is that of orientation of attitude. The perseverance involved in practicing a successful political career pales by comparison with the inspired pursuit of enlightenment to be used for the greater good of all society. Although, naturally enough, those set on the spiritual path of self-fulfilment might have little interest in complicating their lives with the trivia of political machination, the truth is that as these individuals mature and proceed to reconcile their internal conflicts, it is precisely their disinterest in the material, combined with their natural big-picture focus, which makes them potentially outstanding leaders.

As the old boy emphasises; those best suited to wield power and influence are those who do not want them and would hesitate most to use them. In this way, impartiality and the ideal of a light, unassertive and minimalist government is guaranteed. Lao Zi tells us that the wise leader seeks the greater good of the many without regard to personal advantage. By the same token, the very best of leaders are prepared to do what is right even at the expense of their own popularity. This capacity for self-sacrifice is the difference between the true leader, in constant search for the greater good and thus in harmony with the Dao, and the self-serving egotism of the usual 21st century scrambles for power and personal glory.

The old boy often refers to the 'leader' in the singular whereas governments in general are plural organisations. In fact there is little distinction between the two in the practical application of his teaching. In the context of Daoist philosophy, one and all are mostly interchangeable, at least in the sense that the recipes for right-living and right-thinking are just as applicable to groups as they are to individuals. Of course, the old man might also point out that in a group situation, there is more to go wrong. Simplicity makes the quest easier; and it needs to be understood by group members that their groups are only the outward manifestations of the individuals who are responsible for them; they have no life of their own. One risk is that any group member may find themselves failing in the Dao as great journey by mistakenly abdicating their responsibilities to the nebulous 'otherness' of the group…

Our organisations, groups, institutions; all need individuals to give them life and take responsibility for their actions, wherever someone is attributing responsibility to the group – there is a failure in the conduct of proper work upon the self…

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the emphasis of the old boy on simplicity and in his recognition of the complications of group dynamics; those who achieve, or seek to achieve enlightenment by approaching the Dao, are often traditionally cast as solitary figures, giving up family, friends and social status in their personal spiritual quests.

The great sage, the spiritual pilgrim, the monkish recluse; these are all stereotypical loners at the margins of society. However, even though it might be true to say that disengagement from the complex triviality of the everyday is one fast and practical way to obey the old man’s injunction to keep things simple; it does not have to be so. Great leaders with the huge responsibilities of state are most definitely not precluded from the Way, indeed they are urged to follow the path to enlightenment for the sake of their people as well as themselves.

The old boy would be disappointed should we assume that enlightenment is the strict provenance of the hermit, the recluse, or the cloistered ascetic. By now we should know better than that, with eyes flashing under bushy white brows, the old boy enjoins us to look to the example of the unselfconscious humility of ordinary, working people, and to see that the world is full of quietly capable travelers on the way

No individual is ever barred from work on the self, and ultimately, complexity and simplicity are purely states of mind. The pursuit of the Dao is all a matter of individual attitude - and individual application…

14.

When nothing can be seen — it is formless.

When nothing can be heard — it is beyond understanding.

When nothing can be held — it is called intangible.

These three are indefinable — and joined as one.

This nothing is not-bright, not-dark.

It is not-named, not-substantial.

A shape that melts, a form without essence,

The shadow of something — vague and indistinct.

In this nothing, anything may happen

In this nothing, no end may be found.

It is the source, an ancient beginning,

This nothing is a familiar eternal thread,

It connects everything.

To a dispassionate observer of our 21st century western culture, it might seem that it is precisely those people who enjoy wealth, power, social position, good family, education and influence, who also seem to be most prone to feeling the lack of something elemental in their lives. We are all familiar with the stories of those privileged people who defied their apparent natural advantage to suffer pain, desolation, alienation, and depression. There is a distinct grouping within our contemporary western culture of those blessed with material wealth, but who are also the natural constituents of mental health professionals. They are persons who appear to want for nothing; and yet are dispossessed.

The old man knows this situation very well. Neither fame nor fortune is a shield against the dispossession of alienation. Those who enjoy huge public acclaim, distinction in their fields, money, good health, and all the trappings of success; may nevertheless be engaged in substance abuse, have low self-esteem, relationships that fall apart and poor connectivity with the world. They are suffering fragmentation of the self and all their wealth and influence cannot assist them in ‘finding themselves;’ they are unfulfilled.

No one is unduly surprised when a celebrity commits suicide, or any number of highly visible stars of stage and screen mistreat their bodies and die young. Yet, these people are, ostensibly at least, role models; and often a highly publicised inspiration to the ordinary people who value and envy their supposed achievements...

In short, many people who appear to want for nothing, and whose material needs are met, still lead sad and lonely lives. The fact that the psychotherapist has, for many in recent times, usurped the role of priest and confessor is neither here nor there. The old boy is offering us all a timeless message in his perceptions of the Dao, we should therefore never let the neologisms of the new sciences hide the fact that the problems they are addressing are eternal and universal. The real question is then, when we quickly re-examine it with our inner vision; what is this ‘nothing’ these people are wanting for?

In the preceding passage from the *Dao de Jing* the old boy is telling us just what this ethereal essence is. It is the amorphous, nameless, fuzzy, wholeness of the Dao; but as characterised in negatives. It is the primal urge towards the connectedness of Godhead, unity, of self-fulfilment of individual potential. In Sartrean idiom, the 'nothing' that people want is that tiny, unknown part of the self that haunts our sub-consciousness. It is irrational and frighteningly enigmatic. It is shapeless and mysterious, capable of metamorphosis into many forms. It is opaque to the inward vision and resists all probing analysis. It is the source and fountain of our creativity; but it may also be our dark side. Jung would call it our ‘shadow’. The only thing we can say about it, is that, if we are honest and aware, we know it is there, even when we dismiss it as 'nothing'.

It is all that remains to complete us.

The universal source of the angst that causes the recklessly self-destructive behaviour; and plagues the waking hours of those trapped in the barren deserts of fame and fortune is of course, immediately recognisable to the old boy. It is the individual's straightforward apprehension of their own lack of wholeness; caused by inability to grasp that final piece of their own hidden being.

The old boy has the cure for this malady; it is proper work upon the self…



It is ironic that those whose material needs are well and truly satisfied are more prone to experiencing this angst than others. But this situation is hardly surprising when you consider the dynamics of human striving towards inner peace. The first imperatives for humanity, as they are for all species of life on earth, are to feed and breed. Only when material needs are met and survival is no longer an issue can the conscious mind begin to focus wholly on matters spiritual. CITE MASLOW For many, this total freedom from the need to provide for survival never arises; their commitment to the nurture of family and the provision of material comforts is sufficient justification and focus for their lives.

For those with no further material needs, lack of a spiritual goal means they have nothing left to do in life, and yet they still feel the *lack* of something within their being. Sartre’s view is that fundamentally, consciousness is *always* defined as a *lack* of something. In his terms, conscious awareness, being aware of its incomplete nature, always needs something *other* in order to feel complete and *truly* be itself. In this light, it may be that those who lack material possessions are perhaps sometimes favoured by providence; they can still believe that total satisfaction can be achieved in realising their material goals…

Lao Zi’s advice to those in the grip of this angst would be given with an emphatic glint of the eye and with white beard bristling: Say “Yes’ to the unknown within! Be what you are! Total affirmation of *you* is total affirmation of the whole. You can adopt a public persona if you wish, but you are not free to pick and choose the ‘*you’* within. You *are* just what you are, and remain so until the actuality of *you* is accepted. In refusing to accept a part of yourself lies the source of your despair, your alienation, and your ennui. In the nothing within; that you so casually dismiss as not-you, is all creativity, all harmony, and most importantly — all possibility of ever changing.

The old man knows the wisdom of learning to treasure the all, the warts, the blemishes, the grim, the hostile, the perverse; the multitude of imperfections. There really is no choice. When you refuse to accept the smallest part of what really *is* — the whole is forever denied. As Jung said:

To round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness; and for this the ‘thorn in the flesh’ is needed, the suffering of defects without which there is no progress and no ascent.[[16]](#footnote-16)

When it comes to this point, at which the most disagreeable aspects of the self must necessarily be confronted, this is the question that should be asked:

When you deny yourself, who suffers?

15.

From ancient times the wise were subtle and mysterious.

Profound and unfathomable — they are described, but not defined.

They were tentative, like those crossing a stream in winter,

And circumspect, like those aware of danger.

They were as courteous as the welcome guest,

As yielding as the ice in thaw,

As simple as the sculptor's uncarved block,

As empty as the open spaces,

As opaque as the muddy waters.

Yet those who can rest will see the waters settle and clear.

Knowing how to rest, they will also know the time for action.

The wise seek no fulfillment.

They are continually remade in acceptance of now.

16.

Empty your mind of customary thought, belief, prejudice and desire.

When reason stills — greater truths are revealed.

In quiet contemplation of life's diversity,

Begins the understanding that leads to wisdom.

When you can return to this source of stillness,

You will be in tune with the natural rhythms of all life,

In harmony with your own place and destiny in the world.

To act wilfully without this understanding risks disaster.

But, with this awareness your mind and heart will open,

Impartiality of thought and action will be yours,

From this centre springs dignity and nobility of spirit,

And from this again — the highest possible good.

You will be at one to the end of your days,

Knowing that to reach for the highest good, and be still —

Is to achieve something timeless.

In later Confucian times, the work of Lao Zi, already centuries old, began to suffer the fate that eventually befalls all serviceable accounts of personal enlightenment; it became the object of study of an entire school of thought and the inspiration for various religions. The consequence of this for the old boy and his lean, pared down philosophy as expressed in the *Dao de Jing* was predictable; there was a great deal of arid intellectualising on the meaning and import of his text.

As successive layers of complex theory and conjecture, proposed reinterpretations, and changes in emphasis obscured the principles the old boy initially outlined in such deliberate stark simplicity; some crucial elements were inevitably lost. Scholarly reputations were built and destroyed on the basis of specific re-interpretations of the *Dao de Jing*, factions were formed and re-formed as some viewpoints hardened into dogmatic positions lasting for generations. Inevitably in this process, the emphasis shifted from the simple goal of reaching for the whole to the examination of its constituent parts, and the real meaning the old boy was trying so hard to express, became increasingly difficult to discern.

Confucianism is much more a rational intellectual exercise than Lao Zi's spiritually focused and simple Daoist teaching. It is true that together, these schools of thought were the inspiration for the later insights and clean simplifications of the Buddhist Zen masters, but there was a cost. As the scholarly edifice built up around the idea of the Dao, and despite the incisive analysis of many Confucian thinkers and the sophistication of their aesthetic insights; the inevitable downside was eventually revealed. The raw power of the Lao Zi teaching not only became diluted and obscured in a clutter of wordy constructs, but intimate knowledge of his ideas moved from being the province of the ordinary educated individual, to province of ‘experts’…

Lao Zi’s dislike of 'cleverness.' in this context was prophetic. While he would never advocate that one should literally discard all knowledge in pursuit of enlightenment, he always remains adamant that the purely rational is not enough for any understanding of the Dao. The old boy might also have his suspicions that some ‘rationalisations’ might produce a kind of factual knowledge little better than mental debris in terms of usefulness.

The highly educated mind, steeped in empirical method, nurtured on logic, founded in cause and effect and sceptical of all things remotely metaphysical, finds no end of obstacles in pursuing the amorphous substance of the encompassing wholeness that is Dao, and the rationalisations of the later Confucian school often did little to make the old boy’s meaning any clearer. It is both irony and saving grace for the old boy’s ideas as expressed in the *Dao de Jing* that a person of simple education is often more accepting of the mysterious whole and less tempted to doggedly rationalise where direct apprehension through intuition is required.



The old boy disparages the 'cleverness' inherent in the overvaluation of *book learning,* that is, the situation that arises when knowledge and articulate expression are confused with wisdom. The very first words of the *Dao de Jing* tell the story; there is no directly intellectual, logical, rational means to comprehend the whole:

The way that can be spoken of,

Is not the constant way;

The name that can be named

Is not the constant name.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This is not to say that it is always impossible through rational endeavour to advance towards the simplicity of the whole; the ways to unity and harmony are many each individual must begin with the tools at hand. There is scope for enlightenment anywhere; and perhaps especially in individuals exploring the frontier sciences of physics, mathematics and astronomy. But, at some point on any successful journey along the way, life's paradox must be confronted and the polarities in its essential nature accepted, reconciled and integrated. The old boy de-stresses knowledge and learning in this context not through any bias against erudition, but because there is literally no point in attempting any scientific analysis of the Dao essence; even the most highly trained mind will need to accept the necessity to abandon logic and traverse unknown mental terrain in striving towards the nature of the Dao. One must confront one’s demons…

All faiths and creeds concerned with the ultimate enlightenment of the individual have some point at which the follower, in choosing to be a true believer, must abandon the life-raft of conventional thinking and logic. This is a universal constant in the quest for individual realisation. In Christianity as for other major religions, this moment is often known as the the 'leap of faith.' For Lao Tzu, it is not really a leap of faith at all; 'approaching the gateway to the manifold mysteries', is simply to surrender to the need to accept the reality of your own innermost self. There strong parallels here; just as in religious tradition the ‘leap of faith' involves a personal commitment that cannot be rationally justified, so it is with the Dao. Enlightenment cannot be attained by conventional reason alone, there must be some kind of feeling, intuition, recognition of something not; hence the old man's advice:

Empty your mind of customary thought, belief, prejudice and desire.

When reason stills — greater truths are revealed.



17.

The highest good is like the best government — barely noticed by ordinary people.

Next best is the known and the cherished,

Then comes that which is detestable,

Then that which is scorned.

Where faith and trust are lacking, nothing good can come.

When you find the greatest good,

The work is accomplished without unnecessary fanfare,

And the people say, 'It just seemed to happen naturally!'

18.

When the greater good cannot be found,

Pretence and hypocrisy rule.

Then appears 'benevolence' and 'moral outrage.'

And 'rationality' replaces wisdom.

When families are in turmoil,

They pretend to stand together in harmony.

When governments are in turmoil,

Ministers compete in pledging their loyalty.

19.

When conventional wisdom is renounced and popular icons coolly appraised.

Things become a hundred times better.

When we question our own roles, examine our own ethical base,

We rediscover some fundamental values.

When we cease our machinations, place profit in perspective,

Theft and fraud are done with.

There is more to our vocation than a thin veneer of pretense,

Look inwards for the simple truths,

Banish selfish thoughts. Appreciate what you have.

CG Jung said that ‘all science stops at the frontiers of logic, whereas nature thrives there’[[18]](#footnote-18). The old boy would have no problem with that. In accepting the totality we accept the way things really are, we peel away obscurity, we re-examine and re-evaluate, we try to accept that the thing we considered — until now, to be our 'reality' may be something less. All that we are and know, may be just a part-thing, bound by words and convention, and ultimately, something decidedly less than the whole. In peeling back the layers, testing our real convictions, discarding embellishment and posturing, we are released from the constraints of the persona we have built for ourselves.

Freedom is truth; truth is a renewal of the self. However, direct experience of this revelation of freedom is also possibly the knowledge of an inner emptiness or lack; the requirement for the something *other* still necessary for completeness. It is also the discovery of the *real* relationship of the myriad parts of existence as they relate to the whole; and how integration may be finally achieved — or lost.

In existentialist terms, the apprehension of this freedom is very much a two-edged sword. For one striving towards unity it is the elation of being within sight of the goal and the sense of continual personal renewal. But, for one who, like Jean-Paul Sartre, is making an intellectual commitment to resist anything which is not empirical and thus prepared to reject the possibility of individual wholeness as forever unattainable; freedom can be the agonising knowledge that one has burned one's bridges. This degree of personal insight and commitment, once acquired through intellectual analysis, effectively prevents any return to the blissful innocence of simple ignorance; the individual is in a real sense condemned to be free, cast adrift and isolated with the knowledge that the wholeness they seek is beyond reach forever.

It is here that the Sartrean reality approaches its grimmest of pronouncements. Since knowledge cannot realistically be un-acquired, *nothing* can cure this; which means in Sartrean terms that the highly developed intellect must be abandoned and irrational nothingness embraced; this is nothing less than the voluntary embrace of insanity; a very difficult situation indeed.

It is often said that a fine line separates madness and genius. It is somewhere around here that this fine line is drawn...

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For those less implacably committed to the dictates of logic and reason, the news is better.. **MORE**edit here add material from notes

20.

Where there is no knowledge there can be no worry.

What separates yes and no?

What differentiates good and evil?

If you are deterred by the fears you sense in others,

Your potential will not be realised.

Not fearing, I see people enjoying life,

Seeing families on outings, in parks and on terraces,

I am at peace with myself.

Like a baby that has not yet learned to smile, I reveal little

Though others appear to have plenty, my needs are slight.

Though my thoughts seems slow I am complete,

Others shine while I appear dim,

Others are clever while I appear dull,

When everyone else displays purpose, I drift through life.

I place no value on superficial appearance,

And have no urge towards conformity.

Glimpsing the greater good I have purpose, direction and fulfilment

21.

The greatest good lies in only one direction.

And that way is at first vague and indistinct.

But within the shadows of your unknown self is an image,

Within the image is a substance,

And in the darkness of the substance lies an essence.

This essence is the key to understanding,

And the means to realise your proper place in the world,

From your unknown beginnings, to the overflowing abundance of now.

22.

By not opposing the natural course of events, the wise are not opposed.

What bends in the wind straightens with no damage.

To be receptive is to be capable of fulfilment,

What is worn can be renewed.

Small gains may bring major benefit,

When large gains might bring only uncertainty.

Knowing this, the wise accept contradiction, in embracing the whole.

Without being eminent, they become a model,

Without receiving acclamation, they are distinguished.

Without self-promotion, they are recognised,

Without conceit, their merit endures.

Having no disagreements, the wise have no enemies in the world

In not opposing the natural course of events, the wise are not opposed.

This ancient wisdom is the way to the wholeness of life.

When he condemns the ‘cleverness’ that masquerades as wisdom, the old boy does this in the knowledge that the intellectual edifices by which people define and interpret their lives are also the filters and lenses that distort their personal realities. By 'rationalising'; that is, mental processing of the import of direct experience and intuition, some cognitive content is enhanced, some, toned down and some possibly ignored completely.

Lao Zi is once again here hammering home the message that by obscuring and re-shaping the essentials of experience and perpetuating an ersatz reality, an overly-developed intellect may actually be an encumbrance in a genuine search for truth. The old boy is not telling us here that education and knowledge in general represent a liability; far from it. He *is* issuing a solemn warning however, by showing us that the personality quirks commonly related to high academic achievement, might possibly reduce an individuals sensitivity to what is still to be discovered; and thereby engender a false sense of accomplishment; in a circumstance which clearly indicates there is still serious work on the self to be done.

Any bona fide traveler on the way; the great journey towards the Dao, must be prepared to let humility conquer ego to succeed in any genuine quest for spirituality. This requires an appreciation that intellectual ability may foster its own brand of arrogance and egocentric disdain. Over-rationalised and self-centred views of the world represent imbalance. Those hoping to approach the Dao must be open enough to accept the raw facts; the chaos and the paradoxical nature of *reality*, however unpalatable this is.

The injunction of the old boy at this point is this; it is not acceptable to simply reject what cannot be explained; and if this means that some previously accepted teachings need to be unlearned or otherwise discarded – then so be it...

By way of contrast to this dilemma facing the highly educated, the old boy also recognises what may be considered as a kind of natural advantage for the ordinary person; in that the simplicity of a very ordinary life already has some of the features that those seeking innermost truth try so hard to attain. In a sense, any approach towards the unity of the Dao is a quest for a return to a foundation of common values. In this respect, it should not be forgotten that the simplicity, honesty, uncomplicated integrity and direct intuition of an intelligent child, represents a well-travelled route towards the unity of the whole...

Remembering the example of the 'Bear-of-Little-Brain', the old boy recognises that the uncomplicated standards of the honest, unsophisticated person, when untainted by prejudice or bigotry, often represent advancement on the way of Dao as great journey; the work-oriented ethos, the lack of ego-driven ambition, the ability to find contentment in a modest allotment of worldly goods; all of these can be natural advantages for the soul-searcher at the 'lower stratum' of society.

The best way to de-emphasise the intellectual rigour of the quest for spiritual fulfilment is probably to take an example straight out of the book of the children’s fictional character, and Daoist adept, Winnie the Pooh![[19]](#footnote-19)

In wondering vaguely how to organise his daily life, Pooh would simply sing a hummy sort of song, admiring the birds and butterflies, and appreciating the wind in the trees as he strolled. In this apparently unstructured way, and by dint of an open mind, the 'Bear-of-Little-Brain' would let the situation resolve itself without discernible conscious effort. If you consider that all work on the self is reconciliation of opposing elements, and that opposition of the ebb and flow of natural events is rash indeed, this methodology of contented acceptance appears shrewd. After all, the more opposition encountered; the greater the work to do. But for those who are already reconciled to their situation and sense no opposition from nature; advancement towards the Dao proceeds; essentially unopposed. It would be unkind to characterise this in terms of 'ignorance is bliss' The old boy would prefer that we recognise that attunement to the natural order, and acceptance of the vast changeability of life give any individual an advantage in approaching the Dao.

As for accepting contradiction, why think of these things in terms of opposed force anyway? There would be no 'good' without a corresponding 'bad' by which to measure it. 'Appreciation is balanced by 'indifference', 'righteousness' by 'misconduct' ...and the two ends of a piece of string, no matter how far apart, may be joined to form a circle...

Life is a continuum with room for both logic and emotion. Good *needs* bad to retain its character as good, and everything has its place. But of course, between saying these words, and actually realising them within the self, there is still a world of difference…

23.

Explanations can not always be made, or always required.

Strong winds give way to heavy rain that does not last.

It is the nature of all things to change over time.

And so, because everything is always and forever in transition

Attempt no rigid definition of the possible,

— but accept the eternal in the changing whole.

Being at one is the only true expression of your nature.

You are the reflection of all your personal experience.

In acceptance of the whole — even loss will not concern you.

With tolerance and understanding— you experience glad affirmation

If you have no trust in this — you will not be trusted either.

24.

There is no stability on tiptoes, and big strides do not guarantee progress.

Pretence does not confer real esteem, nor self-righteousness admiration.

Do not use idle boasts to feed your pretension, and accept no false regard.

Abandon the excess baggage of your conceit, or — you will lose sight of wholeness.

Change, impermanence, dynamism, an endless ebb and flow; these are just some of the paradoxical characteristics of the constant Dao. No real comprehension of the old boy's message is possible until the truth-seeker begins to recognise that *everything* previously accepted as solid and immutable is actually fluid and in constant motion. It is all a matter of gaining a perception of the universal scale of things. Our understanding of time is a limited thing, geared to our bodily wants and needs, the flux of night and day, the rhythms and seasons of a lifetime; as always there is a bigger picture to grasp.

Not all events take place on the time scale that is easily accessible and recognisable to humanity, there is a ceaseless background motion of which we are all generally oblivious. Perception is a matter of scale: a ball of tar in a laboratory might take 50 years to drip through a funnel into a beaker. Plants seen in time-lapse photography encroach, extend and aggressively explore their surrounds, only to retract, wither and die. It is only the constraints of our normal perception of time and space that makes this perpetual motion undetectable to our senses.

On a greater scale yet, mountains are pushed skyward by the colossal forces of tectonic movement, only to be dissolved, broken down and reduced to dust by the eroding action of wind and water over millennia. As the cycle proceeds, the mountains are forced skywards yet again by inexorable continental forces. ...And beyond even that mighty tide of events, we live in a universe in which the passing of millennia are but the blink of an eye. Raw material is sucked into the cosmic vortex of newly formed galaxies to coalesce into planets and stars that will last for billions of years; then, inevitably given the cyclic, ever-changing enantiodromia of the universe; they are engulfed again in another vast cataclysm that in turn spews out new suns and planets into the void...

The Dao embraces the all; the majestic rhythms of the vast cosmic order, and the almost unimaginable concept of timelessness itself.

What the old boy is asking us to do; given that we are sincere in our quest for personal enlightenment, is to embrace as much of the totality of nature as our minds are capable of grasping. Advancement towards the greater good is always contingent on the acceptance of the individual's place in the universal scheme of things. It is not that the raw facts of our situation are particularly important. What is required to further the personal development of the individual is the humility that arises from the realisation that each human being is an insignificant speck in the cosmic scheme. The secondary effect of this humility and acceptance is to foster the sense of belonging in being a small, but integral part of the vast natural cycle.

25.

At the beginning of all things lies a mystery.

The precursor, the source, unnamed it stands alone.

For most, it is silence, nothing, the void.

Yet, though all else changes — it remains the constant

From this nothing, springs everything that we know.

From this unknown — springs all that is great.

This nothing is the gateway to the whole,

And though our knowledge of it ebbs and flows,

When looking inwards, it is always there.

From this source comes all greatness

From this source comes the virtue of heaven,

From this source comes the merit of Earth,

From this source comes the accomplishment of humanity.

Humanity serves the greater good of the earth,

And earth the greater good of heaven.

Heaven serves the greatest good of the totality.

The primal unknown joins all things naturally in the whole.

26.

In the constant is the root of the light,

In tranquility is the antidote for trouble.

The wise are alert to the hazards of the world,

Exercising vigilance in overseeing their obligations,

Showing diligence when it is due,

Then — later, they rest peacefully and without worry.

Great leaders of the people, have more rigorous obligations,

Without depth in their seriousness — they lose their constancy.

Without gravitas, they lose their hold.

As the beginning and end of all things, the Dao is not only the source of all paradox; it is equally the means for the achievement of unity through their ultimate reconciliation. However, before there is reconciliation, there is necessarily something that must be reconciled. To the troubled soul, the essence of existential crisis is the despair arising from the disintegrated nature of the self; the soul-destroying 'other side' of the quest for unity; the frightening glimpse of an unattainable whole as experienced by those who can detect, but not connect, with their own innermost selves.

These people we are familiar with; the individuals in our society who quite literally are disintegrating, standing, without guidance or direction of any kind on the brink of an abyss. For these lost spirits, individuals embracing hopelessness and lacking in any saving grace, all belief is crushed and ties with reality are frayed and attenuated. Religion and morality are only an empty mockery of nonsensical ritual and useless observance, and society appears ridiculous, repulsive and threatening. At this impasse, values crumble and rationality fails as the individual struggles to maintain a sense of belonging and some grip on a banal and senseless world.

No one drives us as convincingly and relentlessly into this world of disconnection and alienation as Jean Paul Sartre. This is particularly true of his novel, *Nausea,* and more especially of his major philosophical work *Being and Nothingness[[20]](#footnote-20).* Both these worksexplore the minutiae of the human condition in the situation where everything that may be considered as solid and reliable fails. There is the anguished apprehension of chaotic nature and unresolved paradox; but all without any redeeming vision of the possibility of fulfilment and personal integration. One-by-one, as Sartre relentlessly pursues his theme; the life-rafts of conventional thought are sunk into the black depths. The old idols, the old values; all fall under the penetrating scrutiny of an intellect that destroys all that is solid - and then literally wavers at the apprehension of the 'nothingness' within its own fragmented awareness.

Sartre represents human consciousness as in essence fragmented, one of its parts is always an isolated awareness of the unrealised ‘complete’ personality we characterise here as the Dao; and that part of self is agonised by the perception of its own lack of integrity. Sartre refers to the possibility of unity in the whole as the 'ideal synthesis', the totality of individual consciousness, and he describes this in much the same terms us by the old boy and many theologians and philosophers. In his view, despair, anguish: all the elements of the existential crisis, arise when individuals succeeds only in realising a lack of the vital integrating element in their lives.

This missing element here is something the old boy can point us towards in a flash. It is the recognition of the possibility of personal spiritual fulfilment; the achievement of unity in some ultimate wholeness. To an extent, Sartre goes is in agreement with the old boy here, defining (ordinary and unenlightened) human existence as being primarily the consciousness of lacking something; Sartre labels this as ‘the longed-for ideal synthesis’, or even ‘the missing God’. Before he finally rejects the irrational essence (and therefore the possibility of wholeness) entirely, Sartre appears almost ready to embrace the Dao as great journey, when he states that the foundation of all human desire is a drive towards ultimate unity, a transcendent quest to surpass the brute nature of fragmented reality. **cite**

Sartre comes even closer to Lao Ziin his thinking when he postulates that we each contain within ourselves a shadowy insubstantial image of the whole; a *something* that our aspiration toward wholeness is perpetually attempting to solidify. He says we are all engaged in trying to crystallise our possibilities into fact, describing this process as: ‘imperfect being attempts to surpass itself in the direction of perfect being…’ But for Sartre, The Dao or Godhead is just the chimeric externalised representation of the human desire for inner unity. In this denial, Sartre himself rejects the notion of God/unified consciousness, but does not to deny that, for many, this fundamental transcendent quest is a genuine phenomenon and a lifetime commitment.

The essence of the notion of Godhead or spiritual essence for Sartre is simply 'all that I am,' something the old boy could hardly disagree with, and given this viewpoint, it is no surprise that Sartre has no need for the external divinity. Again and yet again, in these reflections his thoughts are very much like Lao Tzu; humanity is continually engaged in an attempt (the old boy would call it ‘work on the self’) to transcend its own limitations and achieve a unified totality that could almost be called 'God'. But; and this is where the philosophies diverge; the existentialist perspective is that the enterprise is forever doomed. For Sartre, whose own consciousness was always poised at the pinnacle of rational endeavour; the maxim is that ‘being cannot be its own totality’. Given this bleak viewpoint, it is perhaps not surprising that Sartre describes human reality as an ‘essentially unhappy consciousness’.

Lao Zi however, would have none of this resignation to ultimate failure; while being the first to admit that one cannot grasp and enclose the whole by any process of rational thought, he would also say that *any* connection with the ultimate is fullness enough. The Dao is not an object to be finally arrived at and seized as a prize. The Dao, the way; is both a journey towards and a spiritual connection with; the act of transcendence is its own sufficiency. Proper work on the self as the old boy knows it, already has a sense of arrival in being in harmony with self and others. In Daoist terms, one might say Sartre has simply made an intellectual decision to isolate himself in his rationalisations at the very moment the goal is in sight; and the ultimate surrender to, and acceptance of, the indistinct and fuzzy wholeness of the irrational centre has not been offered.

The old man would be saddened and point out yet again that ‘cleverness’ is not enough; no matter how elegantly defined and eloquently rationalised are the intellectual structures.

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Jungian thought has its parallels here too, for Jung, the innermost self is our oceanic unconscious mind. It too, is comparable to the unknown and unnameable otherness that is found in both Sartre and the *Dao de Jing*. The barely perceived (for many) potential for unity and self-fulfilment is the God-image; a part of the archetype of the self that is found in the unconscious. **CITE**

For Jung as for Lao Tzu, the quest for ultimate harmony via either the commitment to a deity or by the fulfilment of individual potential, springs from this omnipresent urge towards totality, something felt deep within *every* individual who has achieved a small degree of analytical self-awareness. He says:

The world comes into being when man discovers it. But he only discovers it when he sacrifices his containment in the primal mother, the original state of unconsciousness[[21]](#footnote-21)

Jung’s ‘primal mother’ and the old boy’s primal ‘she’, the ‘yin’ principle; they are one and the same. They represent the unknown wholeness, veiled mystery and creative source of all things. This is also the place there are dark unplumbed depths, where rationality confronts, and surrenders too (or is overwhelmed by), the irrational elements of life. This dark unknown is an essential stopover on the road to any degree of self-knowledge and enlightenment. It is the acceptance of not just what is *nature;* it is what is *our* nature.

The most important thing *all* these thinkers agree on is the whereabouts of this ultimate wholeness, the place the where ultimate unity is to be found. While you can look anywhere in the wide universe for facts and arguments, examples, principles and paradigms and evidence of external deities; true integration into the whole of the Dao is an internal process of fulfilment that happens *only* inside *you*…

27.

The accomplished traveller leaves no signs,

The accomplished speaker makes no mistakes,

Precise reckoning requires attention.

Security does not depend on locks, but on taking care,

And caring creates a binding that is stronger than cords.

The wise, having a care for all humanity,

Will abandon no one.

The wise, having a care for everything,

Are the means to sustain and preserve all things.

This is called 'following the greater good'

Who is the follower of greater good?

The wise person who is teacher of the bad.

What is the bad?

The raw material used in making the good.

When the value of the teacher remains unrecognised,

And the value in the raw material is overlooked.

Then intelligence is not tempered by caring and confusion follows.

This is a mysterious and essential truth.

28.

Discover the power of the masculine,

Appreciate the caring strength in the feminine.

Then, knowing that the good flows like water to the lowest points,

Be the stream of the universe.

Before long, in your truth and your constancy,

You will uncover the innocent enchantments of your childhood.

Knowing what is white,

And yet admitting the role of the black,

Be an example for humanity.

In becoming the true ideal, unwavering,

Return to the infinite realm of the good.

The wise know the meaning of honour,

But are constrained by humility.

The wise become the vital channel of the universal stream.

As individual truth and wisdom grow,

Less and less artifice is revealed,

Returning to nature, the wise are restored in full

— like the wholeness of the uncarved block.

The uncarved block has the potential of a multitude of forms,

But each cutting and shaping limits further potential,

So the wise shape, but do not disjoint — in this way unity is sustained

29.

Do you think you can improve the whole of our universe alone?

You cannot do this and still maintain tranquility.

This is a sacred whole.

Whatever can be done to it, will ruin it.

Whoever tries to take hold of it, will lose it.

There are followers and there are leaders,

The breath of life comes sometimes easily —sometimes hard.

There are cycles of both strength and weakness,

Now you are the destroyer — and now the destroyed.

The wises avoid all extremes, all excesses and all complacency.

Sometimes, there is simply no substitute for going back to the basics and asking silly questions. This is the mental equivalent of checking the foundations of the house before building up another level, of course it seems rock-solid and it has served you well so far. But will things always be that way?

Once you start to query what was previously the undisputed truth; and even those recognized benchmarks by which other truths are gauged, it is surprising how often certainty falters. It may seem fruitless to start questioning the true positions of the points of the compass for instance, but on inspection, a surprising amount of solid ground turns to treacherous quagmire. North, south, east and west are well fixed in most minds, but how concrete are they?

The compass informs that, from an Australian viewpoint, what I think of as being a large part of 'the west', the USA, is actually my far east. And what I think of as ‘far east’ is in reality only slightly to the east of due north. The ‘real’ east is a place firmly situated in my geographic northwest.

Similarly, the 'middle east' is where it always was; way over to the west; and confusingly perhaps, so are the countries once known collectively as the 'eastern bloc'. Europe to be sure is 'western' and situated to my west, but I still need to travel a long way north and then pass through 'the east' and the 'middle east' to get to it. Of course, if I was in the USA to start with, 'western' Europe would be well to my east and I would find that the far east was over to my west. Things are obviously not what they seem, and our relative perspectives are obviously very important in determining what may be an ‘ultimate’ truth.

Ii is not really that the compass is wildly unreliable, though we know it is imperfect. What we need to understand here, is that the names we use to define and categorise things can let us down. The labels we attach to things, even proven, absolutely certain, rock-solid, totally dependable things; can be subversive. Language itself can betray us. 'The west' may forever be only the west, but the label itself has been shown to be insubstantial and misleading in carrying a mass of implied meaning, where only strict definition was expected.

The old boy is right in insisting that the whole, the Dao, is unnamed and unnameable. The truth is that what is named is corruptible, as labels are prone to decay. What is named carries a lot of ‘baggage’ in the sense of psychological, linguistic, cultural and emotional overtones and undertones. The very fact of Jungian enantiodromia implies that no label can be trusted as definitive and unchangeable for all time. In seeking precision of understanding, we must beware of facile definition and conscious of the probability that some, perhaps all, of the labels attached to concepts that we hold dear (and truths that we hold to be inviolate) may be equally slippery and untrustworthy. If our Gods can metamorphose into ‘isms’ and our demons to psychological constructs and traumas; what else might be transformed?

Yet, in spite of the unreliable nature of the rigidly defined, humanity *seeks* solid ground, pursues the immutable guiding principles that are (supposedly) life's eternal fixtures. Safe anchor, foundation and focal point; there must be something to hold fast too, or lives are pointless. Meaning, ambition, drive; all these fail and the will dissolves without some fundamental direction and purpose. This is what the old boy offers us in the *Dao de Jing,* a simple, but accessible means to give direction and focus to an individual seeking purpose in life.

If we are to achieve some sense of purpose and gain some small insight into the mysteries of the central unity, the old boy has warned us more than once that we are required to firstly, accept the indefinable and unnameable essence that permeates the wholeness of life. Yet, just as soon as we catch a glimpse of this totality and attempt to encapsulate it in words, we risk losing it forever…

Having named the unnameable – what has been achieved?

We must accept that any static definition can never do justice to the ever-changing essence that is the beginning and end of all things; the whole will always transcend any perception we may have of it.

Re-examining our labels is a necessary part of the task we set ourselves in keeping our minds open. We need to periodically re-visit our definitions of the fundamentals to prevent them from being tainted with unwanted overlays of meaning. The consequence of our *not* undertaking some kind of regular and fundamental evaluation of basic premises is that we may quite unknowingly forget that the Dao is a cycle of change, and drift ever further from the ideal. In a very real way, enlightenment is only a continual renewal of primary understanding and an acceptance of the way things really are.

First steps along this way are necessarily small ones, accepting that the truth that is known may be only a small portion of the totality; and that wisdom may be only the disturbing knowledge that one has yet to learn anything of note. These are ideas worth some consideration, especially for those accustomed to accepting certain core values without question. Even a cursory investigation of things changeless and truths held dear reveals uncertainties and inconsistencies galore. At both the macro and micro ends of the universe, scientific rational explication generally becomes vague and unsatisfying, and the accepted models crumble.

Common sense and reason offer but a partial paradigm of reality. Worse still, there is evidence to suggest that the ‘laws of nature’ will *never* be definitive — there are uncertainty principles at work that introduce an element of random chance at the heart of all things; despite our best efforts to make order from the chaos. We know that some elements of the irrational must become acceptable before the great way is embarked upon in earnest. This is not to say however that reason should give way to the occult, just that there needs to be a healthy appreciation that logic does not always prevail in the universe, or in our lives.

The old boy is serious when he says that the whole, the Dao, is the source of all paradox. This is the place where things cycle into their opposites. Lao Ziwould also be first to admit that there exists the element of chance which is also a part of the irrational; and this also must be accepted; although it can work for either good or bad. All the way through Daoist teaching runs this thread of impermanence; the dynamic ebb and flow of transformation.

The old boy will repeat this mantra until you are sure of it; the only true constant is the absolute certainty of change. **MORE the uncarved block from notes**

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30.

When advising a great leader of the way to unity

Advise caution in the use of their power.

For massive force will always meet massive resistance.

Where opposing troops meet — is the wasteland,

And pain and hunger will follow the war.

Therefore use minimum force and aim for a swift conclusion.

There is no glory in proceeding after victory,

Nor in intimidation when the fight is won,

There is no honour in being arrogant with the defeated.

Where wisdom prevails, results are achieved the natural way,

And not through violence.

Force used for aggression and not protection,

Is force used against the natural law,

That which goes against this greater good will not survive.

31.

The weapons of war are the tools of fear,

They are detested and avoided by the wise.

And used in sadness when all else fails.

To glory in the conduct of war,

Is to relish in the destruction of humanity,

In this way the greater good is lost.

The place of the follower is on the left, the side of rejoicing,

That of the supreme commander, on the right, the side of mourning.

So, a great victory should be observed in sorrow, as a funeral.

There is no joy in killing.

The victor should properly weep for those killed in defeat.

The advice Lao Zi gives us here seems as pertinent now as it would have been to the warlords of ancient China. If we consider the question: Has humanity advanced at all since the old man’s time? We might respond , ‘Yes’, with regard to the accumulation of scientific and technical knowledge and ability; but have we changed much in our innermost natures? Are we better people? This is a matter for contention, but the answer is probably not…

We use force as much or more than ever, and contemporary news bulletins are predictably dreadful: Hostilities have generally broken out on a dozen fronts: there is drought in Africa and flooding in South East Asia. Everywhere poverty and hardship is on the increase. Among the atrocities reported are mutilations by machete and executions by firing squad. The rebels, guerrillas, freedom fighters, insurgents, sectarian members, liberation armies, splinter groups and militias have all advanced. Landmines, malaria, HIV and malnutrition continue to extract their toll in human misery. Mass graves have been discovered; ethnic cleansings reported, and all the time, government corruption and factional infighting are preventing the effective distribution of aid... Not much better than the year 500 BCE really and the old boy would certainly recognise some of the scenarios above…

Then there are the stark and cruelly uncompromising images that accompany these stories; pot-bellied toddlers with match stalk arms and legs, the haunted, careworn faces of the prematurely aged squatting barefoot in the dust. The camera captures the inhumanity of it all; burnt-out cars and grim-faced police or soldiers with riot shields and flak jackets, the brutal ugliness of automatic weapons casually brandished by boys not yet old enough to shave. Devastated urban landscapes; shantytowns with open sewers and listless scabby children in rags, blood-splashed streetscapes littered with the debris of broken lives; amputation, laceration, and desolation… Alienation…

And meantime, around the world the dispossessed are on the move; filling the temporary refugee camps that seem ever more permanent as the years go by, living squalid lives of hopelessness, pain and fear. The casualties of confrontation, of squabbles over oil, power, territory; survive miserably under cover of cardboard and plastic, or peer out from behind razor wire with dead eyes. For a few fleeting seconds nightly we see them, trudging dispiritedly with eyes downcast across bleak landscapes, carrying meagre possessions in prams, handcarts and wheelbarrows along roads pocked with bomb-craters and littered with the detritus of technological warfare.

These dispossessed are the desperate edge of humanity on the run. They are the flotsam of armed conflict, people who have abandoned everything except a tiny flicker of hope. They are prepared to cross high mountain passes and barren deserts in search of something better, putting at risk the lives of themselves and their families in the hands of unscrupulous traffickers in human misery. They cross borders at the dead of night, when necessary carrying their young, their frail and their sick; they take to the ocean in leaky boats for destinations they have barely heard of and to live with people who despise them as illegal immigrants even before they meet. In the face of need, they join the dreary roll-call of people staking their lives on finding sanctuary in a world ever more battle-hardened and compassion-fatigued…

All of the above has been happening throughout human history, so it is no wonder that the old boy repeatedly emphasises caution and restraint in the use of force in both personal and state affairs. The problem here is that, for all those with an interest in defending family, village and nation, the call to arms can have a compelling force. For young men in particular, that force may be irresistibly seductive. And this sinister attraction is even stronger in any rootless, superficial environment of discontent where people drift without purpose. In this context of unfulfilled hopes and frustrated endeavour, war can even masquerade as ultimate purpose and perversely fill that void in people's lives that should rightly be filled in striving towards spiritual integrity.

That is the chilling reality of a holy war, a jihad, a crusade, an inquisition, and even the xenophobia of the racial puritans and the ethnic cleansers. These are all types of personal mission with the potential to become a pseudo-spiritual quest. In the very act of impelling people towards confrontation and self-destruction, the rising determination to fight a ‘just’ war can bestow an illusory and temporary sense of purpose and fulfilment that *feels like enlightenment* to those who would commit themselves wholly to its cause…

This is the dark side of the Dao, the perversion of the transcendent impulse towards violence and oppression; and a force with which the old boy had more than a passing acquaintance…

Lao Tzu's assessments of the uses and abuse of power are as good now as they were in 500BC, and as ever, his advice is as valid for nations as it is for individuals. Jung summed up the situation in psychological terms that neatly parallel the thoughts expressed in the *Dao de Jing,* in this piece written just as humanity was headed into the tumult of World War II:

Before the war broke out in 1914 we were all quite certain that the world could be righted by rational means. Now we behold the amazing spectacle of states taking over the age-old totalitarian claims of the theocracy, which are inevitably accompanied by the suppression of free opinion. Once more we see people cutting each other’s throats in support of childish theories of how we create paradise on earth.

…the powers of the underworld – not to say of hell – which in former times were more or less successfully chained up in a gigantic spiritual edifice where they could be of some use, are now creating, or trying to create, a state slavery and a state prison devoid of any mental or spiritual charm. There are not a few people nowadays who are convinced that mere human reason is not entirely up to the enormous task of putting a lid on the volcano. [[22]](#footnote-22)

The bigger picture of war is always appalling no matter how worthy the cause may appear, and Jung is right, ‘mere reason’ is not enough. In reality, wholly irrational wars are fought by supposedly rational beings for supposedly rational ends. The old boy is certainly correct when he asserts that we are not yet mature if we can seek glory in destruction, or feel any elation untinged by sorrow in victory. He might also add that neither are we capable of self-fulfilment until we can feel genuine sympathy for the vanquished enemy. Pain, hunger, desolation, misery, and sorrow are the only sure outcomes for war.

No one wins, except for a few avaricious individuals and corporate bodies.

Although *any* supreme leader can unleash the might of their armies to devastating effect; only the very greatest of leaders can successfully lead a nation to victory through restraint.

32.

The greater good remains forever undefined,

An uncarved block does not reveal all its possible forms.

The natural cycles of ebb and flow yield to no one.

Yet if our great leaders can understand this natural flux,

The whole world will be united in harmony.

Happiness and equity will prevail for all, though no decree is made.

Divide the wholeness, and you must then name its parts.

But in the division lies confusion.

The wise know when there are names enough.

Knowing the time to stop naming averts disaster.

Let the greater good flow like a river to the oceanic whole.

33.

Those with great knowledge hold high office.

But those with self-knowledge are higher yet.

Those who can overcome others have some strength,

Those who overcome themselves have great strength.

Knowing when you have enough is being rich,

Perseverance is the badge of purpose.

Endurance lies in holding fast to purpose,

To live this way is to live the best of all possible lives.

34.

The greatest good reaches left and right,

An invisible essence supporting all of life,

It is quiet accomplishment.

Remaining unnoticed, it is called small,

But as a resource for the entire world, it can be called great

Because it is truly great,

It really does not matter if it is named — or remains nameless.

35.

Capture the harmony of the innermost essence of the whole,

And the whole world will seek you out.

When liberation, tranquility and happiness in unity are found,

Both mind and soul are nurtured.

This is not something that can be tasted, seen, or felt,

Yet lacking substance it is sensed and known,

As inexhaustible nexus, happy union.

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36.

Understand the extent of a conviction,

Will it stretch it to fit the whole?

All that is powerful will ultimately fail.

So, strengthen the foundations,

But know that you are implying a weakness.

When infirmity follows supremacy.

And the soft and weak defy the strong.

The subtle nature of contingency is discerned

As fish are hidden in the depths,

Real power is hidden in the world.

37.

Although inaction is pre-eminent in unity - nothing is left undone.

The leaders of our state should observe the natural cycles,

Heeding the gradual, natural transformation of all things,

And then discover how in simple affirmation,

Want and longing subside in tranquil clarity.

In the whole is the potential for everything — the desire for nothing.

When the people live this way,

Then comes the freedom that brings peace and harmony to all.

All lives contain the possibility of the sudden breakthrough moment; of Eureka! This is the instant at which the final pieces of the puzzle slot into place and enlightenment dawns. Daoist, Buddhist and particularly Zen literature is full of accounts of enlightenment striking suddenly like a thunderbolt to produce that longed-for moment of understanding and completion when the exclamation is; suddenly it all makes sense!

Underlying these words, and this moment of spontaneity, is an abrupt appreciation of context and the perception of precisely how the set of impressions and associations that uniquely define the here and now fit together. A new mental template clicks into place, the big picture is revealed, exasperation disappears - and the light dawns...

Orientation through the chaos of the everyday world is all a matter of choosing the precisely ‘right’ referential framework. This is why the old boy insists that every individual’s way to the Dao is different. The simple, but hard-learned fact is; we are all the singular product of our own unique environment.

Human habitats are not simply colourful backdrops to the lives of the people who live in them; they are ambient factors seared into the psyche of the inhabitants and determining attitude and ability. People are the sum of their experiences, and experience is shaped by circumstance. Just as every set of life experiences is unique, there can be no single and universally applicable road to spiritual fulfilment; this is why Lao Zi stresses that the ways to personal realisation are many, and are to be found within.

Our personal experience gives us knowledge of the world, and according to Jung, at least, *everything* beautiful and majestic in our culture is the result of a single individual being struck by a propitious idea[[23]](#footnote-23). Yet, for anything more than the most fleeting glimpse of the Dao, our senses alone are insufficient. In Jungian terms:

Human passion falls within the sphere of conscious experience, while the object of the vision lies beyond it. Through our senses we experience the known, but our intuitions point to things that are unknown and hidden, that by their very nature are secret. If ever they become conscious, they are intentionally kept secret and concealed, for which reason they have been regarded from earliest times as mysterious, uncanny, and deceptive. They are hidden from man, and he hides from them out of religious awe, protecting himself with the shield of science and reason. The ordered cosmos he believes in by day is meant to protect him from the fear of chaos that besets him by night — his enlightenment is born of night-fears![[24]](#footnote-24)

Every person seeking the unity of the whole is required to work on themselves; to delve into the darkness of that internal mother-lode of chaos and creativity and find their own independent ways to resolve their own particular and personal set of contradictions.

This may be a long and arduous process involving great diligence and some sacrifice. Or it may be as simple as saying; enough is enough! Now is the moment to stop the naming and describing of parts and think about the integrity of the whole. Or it may even be; now is the time for some relaxation and recreation, we’ll let things work themselves out and accept whatever comes from within. We inflict on ourselves whatever trial by ordeal seems appropriate as a rite of passage, but the old boy does not insist on this. If pressed, he would certainly recommend doing it the easy way.

However, as we approach that deepest and most irrational part of our humanity, we necessarily begin to confront our deepest fears and uncertainties. In essence we are bypassing and for the time being at least, *abandoning*, that rational element we *consider* to be our innermost self. In doing this, we open up to the emotional and intuitive reality of the *real* innermost self. It seems incongruous to phrase the experience in mediaeval terms, but language can be inadequate at this outer fringe of experience. What we might face at this moment is the primordial fear of loss of our souls, a kind of demonic possession if you will; we loosen our grip on the rational without the sure knowledge it can ever be seized again…

It is no wonder that Sartre rejected this course, but perhaps the more towering the intellect, the greater the challenge. For those who already are attuned to instinct and intuition, and who prize ‘gut-feeling’ and sudden epiphanies, the way may not be so daunting.

In the end, we choose how this experience will go.

38.

To live by the highest good is a mode of being.

It is not the consciousness of trying,

Or the observance of the rules of goodness,

Trying and observing are acts— something is left undone.

In being is completion, the inaction of the whole.

Living by the greater good leaves nothing undone.

Benevolence acts, yet without thought of personal gain,

Kindness acts, yet leaves much undone,

Morality and justice act, but expect an observance in return,

Then, when persuasion fails, ritual demands the use of force.

So, when the greater good is lost from the state, benevolence prevails,

Until true benevolence gives way to kindness,

Then, when kindness is compromised, justice and morality rule,

With justice and morality abandoned, empty ritual gains ascendancy.

Since ritual is but the emptied coffer once filled by greatest good,

Confusion and disorder gain mastery in the state.

Foreknowledge, being a flowery adornment to the greater good,

Is where foolishness begins.

The wise know that wholeness is found in the thickness of reality,

And never the thin crust of superficiality,

As nourishment is in the fruit and not in the flower.

So the wise in rejecting the other — are accepting the one.

Right and wrong, good and bad; what constitutes proper living? Our values are shaped in part by the vernacular in which we interpret and express our experience. What this means in practical terms is that our belief-systems are widely differentiated; what appears as normal and every day to one person may seem wildly and ludicrously exotic to another. It is even, as can be demonstrated below, possible to live an entirely *irrational* life, which yet has value and structure

Anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, when studying the Azande people of the southern Sudan in the 1920’s found himself in a society in which there was no such thing as natural death or bad luck. It was a world ruled by witchcraft and magic oracles,[[25]](#footnote-25) a world where *all* natural disaster was known to be the result of malignant sorcery.

What surprised Evans-Pritchard, and in its explanation caused his work to become a classic of ethnography, was in the first instance the fact that the Azande were wont to determine their conduct in society in strangely non-rational ways. Not least of these was the oracle they consulted by observing the effects of a natural poison called *Benge*, which they force-fed to hapless chickens.

The second remarkable thing was that, despite the outlandish and bizarre nature of this oracle (and many other Azande convictions) to the European mind, Evans-Pritchard gives an account of a remarkably coherent and stable system of implicit belief; although it is a system based wholly on witchcraft and magic. The Azande were by any estimate of normality completely *irrational* in their beliefs; and that raised, and continues to raise, some serious doubts concerning *our* own beliefs and how someone able to take a detached viewpoint of the things which we consider unequivocally true might question *them*.

Evans-Pritchard found that, when he finally surrendered to his local situation and ‘went native’, abandoning science and logic as the determining factors of his working life to adopt the apparently crazy values represented by the way of the Azande, life went on without interruption. There were no huge upheavals, no conflicts that were irreconcilable, and the orderly rhythms of his household did not descend into chaos. Furthermore, he found on deeper examination of local dogma that the beliefs of the Azande were not just *resilient* to any criticism offered on the grounds of logic and rational explanation; they were apparently *impregnable*. In other words, the Azande neither *wanted nor needed* rationalism.

For their own part, the Azande regarded the Evans-Pritchard scientific mind-set as quite odd and peculiar, and they simply refused to waste their valuable time on the considerations he raised; which to their mind were so obviously futile. When Evan-Pritchard tried to catch them out with his logic he failed, miserably. He found that there was *no* circumstance he could contrive that lacked explanation in terms of their own belief, their worldview was complete.

Given the fact that the Azande view of the world could not/cannot be proven wrong, and that any judgment made about it was entirely subjective; who could truthfully say that the Azande were wrong and western science right?

Commentator Max Marwick wrote of this phenomenon:

…the parallel between science and witchcraft … may be closer than we have hitherto assumed …both scientists and tribesmen …hold theories of causation, both derive specific explanatory hypotheses from these theories, and both carefully apply recognised tests to these hypotheses.[[26]](#footnote-26).

The Azande, along with all the other peoples of the world in social groups that are *not* built around a defining superstructure of logic and reason, still need to cope with *all* the exigencies of life; and somehow, and unlikely as it may at first appear, their own belief system (based on divination and sorcery) made this perfectly possible. What will most surprise those raised within the confines of the western mode of thinking and relating to the world is just how easy it can be to live without logical or rational justification for one's conduct. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are both labels frequently applied in the wrong context. A thing is not right because we *usually* do it that way; and it is certainly not wrong because we *never* do it that way.

In understanding and reconciling opposites, as a part of the quest for personal fulfilment through the Dao, it sometimes helps to be able to slip effortlessly from one specialist vocabulary of experience to another. Language itself can, as we already have discovered, be a limiting factor in absolute comprehension; *genuine* understanding, of the Dao as the whole, the greater good, the Godhead, the archetype of self, the integration of personality, and the supreme life force. The languages of psychology, philosophy, the occult, and of religious experience are all relevant to that all important big-picture view.

Though we are now disinclined to admit being possessed by demons, we still seek therapy for our 'neuroses', the terminology is updated, but historically (as Jung pointed out) nothing has changed but the language of expression. In the broader historical sense, over the millennia; all our Gods die, to be reborn as ‘isms'; at worst, chauvinism and patriotism (the old boy shudders at these never to be sufficiently maligned terms) and at best Buddhism and pacifism. Spiritual salvation is re-branded as ‘individuation.’ ‘Nothingness’ is the existential gateway to mystery - and the Dao as great journey, ‘spirituality’ is consciousness of the God-image within the archetype of the self. ‘Wisdom’ is the direct cognition of the natural ebb and flow, and so far removed from our ideas of factual 'knowledge' - that Winnie-the Pooh has it in abundance!

The dark and negative side of all this is that, even though the idiom and vocabulary of the quest for our own personal realisation twists, turns, contradicts and denies; through it all, we hang on to our reason and the lexicon of our early experience like a limpet to a rock.

The old boy would certainly recognise the principle that, ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’. This is why he asks the truth-seeker to consider carefully what is meant (in the verses above) by his description of the downward spiral of disintegration represented by this sequence:

Greater good… benevolence… kindness… justice and morality… ritual… confusion and disorder…

Such a question always has more than one good answer, or it would be impossible to discuss the Dao in so many different terminologies of knowledge and experience. But a good start in answering might be made with the observation that, settling for second best is *not* the hallmark of the committed seeker of ultimate truths.

Knowing as did the old boy, that language and the habituation to the norms of culture might conceal as much as reveal, how shall we answer the original question: Right and wrong, good and bad; what constitutes proper living?

The essence of this answer is something the old boy pushes though he knows he will be ignored by many and unheard by even more; the greater good lies in choosing substance over form every time. Whether you are a western empirical scholar schooled in logic, or a respected oracular haruspex among the Azande who is schooled in divination through inspection of the entrails of dead animals; your authority, your personal dignity and your integrity rest on your commitment to following your own instinctive (and often unconscious) feeling of doing *exactly* what you *know* is right. The old boy will also warn you that simply doing *only what is acceptable*, or *just what might be expected* is *not* enough for any serious seeker of the whole.

The instinctive impulse to choose substance over form is something that comes from a maturing within, and represents a significant turning point in an individual life. This expression of commitment in the Dao-as-great-journey has a counterpoint in the language of western theology; there it is variously known as, ‘receiving one’s vocation; and ‘hearing the voice of God.’

In psychological terms it is ‘listening to the inner voice’. In secular terms the analogous expression is; ‘living life with a passion’…

39.

These are the attributes of the whole from time immemorial:

The heavens, by virtue of their wholeness are translucent.

The earth, by virtue of its wholeness, is firm and solid.

The divine, by virtue of its wholeness, has strength and power.

The valley, by virtue of its wholeness, is full.

All the multitude of creatures, are by virtue of their wholeness, alive.

The supreme leaders of the people, by virtue of their wholeness,

— Maintain the integrity of the state.

These are all united in the whole.

Lacking the whole that makes it translucent, the heavens might darken,

Lacking the whole that makes it solid, the earth might split apart,

Lacking the wholeness of unity, the divine might lose strength and power.

Lacking the whole that gives fullness, a valley might run dry.

Lacking the whole that gives life, the multitude of creatures might depart this world

Lacking the whole that gives them authority, supreme leaders might ruin the state.

All that is greatest is founded in the humble.

The high draws strength and stability from its roots in the low.

So, the greatest leaders feeling isolated in their highness,

Take solace from being humble servants of their people.

40.

The greater good turns, returns and circulates,

Taking always the path of least resistance,

And all that there is known comes from something,

That arises in nothing.

What is the greater good? What is it *not*? It is certainly not a set of observances. It is also not painstaking adherence to the letter of the law, and it is not the ready, thoughtless acceptance of rule and regulation. In fact, it is not the zealous application of anything at all. Rather, it is the expression of fulfilment in appropriate action; and the proper mode of being of one striving towards the Dao.

We, meaning the peoples of the approximate ‘west’ and ‘north’ of the world, mostly think of our institutions as broadly reflecting our own standards and principles, and we generally also credit ourselves with being progressive, humane, compassionate, and tolerant. We sometimes forget, or fail to notice that there *is always* a dark and complementary downside to all things positive and affirmative.

Just as the individual seeking fulfilment *must,* at some point,face and accept the weaknesses and unpleasant aspects of the discovered inner self; so must the individuals comprising the corporate bodies of society at every level take responsibility for finding and addressing the weaknesses within the organisational structure. This injunction from the old boy applies at every level up to and including the state itself.

Many people mistakenly understand that they are responsible *to* an organisation; but then fail to realise that as a member, they are also responsible *for* it. Without the active oversight of its members, any organisation has no morality, no conscience, and no sense of restraint; and yet still may have a lot of power and influence that can be misused in damaging ways.

It is a purely legal fiction that organisations are independent entities capable of taking responsibility; they are not. The reality is that every organisation is actually a mindless and amoral vehicle for the furtherance; good or bad, of the ideas of the strongest and most influential of its constituent members. It is also true to say that in the face of member apathy, incomprehension, or even fear of reprisals; even the most well-meaning of organisations can have their agendas commandeered in the service of some unscrupulous intent.

Working towards the greater good requires an appreciation of the interplay of roles and responsibilities between individual and institution, and importantly, an acknowledgement of the culpability of individual members in *any* and *all* failures of the organisation to adopt the highest possible standards of practice. Blaming the organisation for its mistakes is like blaming the heavy blunt instrument at the crime scene; but not the individual who wields it with murderous intent.

Organisations follow the path of the greater good only to the extent that they are so guided by their members; they can and do get out of control. Historically, there are numerous examples (in various countries) of organisations, particularly those charged with responsibility for state security, exceeding their briefs and committing criminal acts. When the members begin to believe the organisation has some autonomous function that does not require their active participation or intervention, the old boy warns us that it is perhaps time to feel anxiety about precisely what or whose interests that organisation is serving…

A closer examination of the actual roles of organisations whose activities we generally accept without question can produce startling results. The old boy warns us that our liberal democratic institutions ought to be our servants, and asks us to reflect on just how good they are in providing the service they are meant to. How well do our institutions provide assistance to the poor; the discriminated against, those lacking shelter, medical care, access to justice, proper nutrition, education, basic facilities, and recourse to support services? Who are the organisations and individuals responsible? More importantly, who feels they should be responsible?

Society, as represented by its institutions, always retains the capacity for a viciousness and brutality mostly undreamed of by its constituent citizenry; until that capability impinges upon them directly. We may imagine ourselves in a comfortable niche in a liberal and humanitarian environment; but the old boy for one, is advocating a wary vigilance. We can be deceived and threatened at every level by the very organisations we create to protect ourselves and our lives can be ruined. We can be forced to fight wars we want no part of; we can be forced to accept decisions that impinge negatively on our lives, and we can be forced to accept decisions that we may consider immoral and unfair.

CG Jung was one of the great thinkers of his time, and one who knew something of the psychology of organisations and commented with great insight on the phenomenon of their development as amoral juggernauts capable of carving a destructive swathe through whole societies. Jung characterised the institutions of society as potentially dangerous independent entities lacking scruples, conscience and sense of liability for actions performed. He wrote that; "*any* large company composed of wholly admirable persons has the morality and intelligence of an unwieldy, stupid and violent animal"[[27]](#footnote-27).

Consider the wars, terrors, pogroms and repressions launched by societies on their neighbours, or even, on their own constituent elements. Then also consider the fact that if there *is* to be some final, devastating, and totally unnecessary holocaust; it will be brought about by some institution within society claiming it is acting rationally on behalf of its members; almost all of whom might claim they do not really want it and are not themselves responsible for it...

And, in this direst of situations, even though *each and every* member of society may protest the insanity and truly *feel* their individual righteous innocence; the deed will still have been done, and the destruction will still need to be dealt with.

Behind the benevolent countenances, behind the ethical facades and the noble mission statements the old boy warns that *all* large organisations and indeed, *all* governments, no matter how altruistic, base their ultimate authority on their capacity for violence. Our corporate entities expect ordinary citizens to toe *their* established lines and non-compliance brings retribution swiftly and surely.

As was the case for Lao Zi in 500 BCE, and remained the case throughout the intervening millennia, governments commonly and recurrently safeguard their own power base at the expense of basic liberties, and the basic rights and well-being of their citizens. Without exception, all governments quite unambiguously offer a sliding scale of violent penalty for infractions of the rules by their citizens; while at the corporate level, organisations exercise their influence to take what punitive measures they can to deter those they consider ‘wrong-doers’ in enterprise. If we are listening closely to the old boy here, we should also be keenly aware that; since ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are legally defined by governments, and market rules and regulations frequently dictated by corporations, the odds are heavily weighted against the citizen no matter how just the individual cause.

In the international arena of course, the entire existence of the state revolves around familiar games of threat and counter-threat with external governmental bodies similarly set up to protect (and threaten) their own citizens. And while the deadliest weapons of war are brandished, and the direst threats issued, each individual on both sides of the hostile divide may *still* maintain that *they themselves* stand for peace, truth and justice; they will probably even both claim that God is firmly on their side…

Lao Zi was the product of an era when capricious autocratic government was the norm, and supreme rulers could justify their excesses, and the far reaching destructive consequences of their acts of pure impulse, by claiming a divine mandate. For the old boy with direct experience and observation of the fickle nature of leadership, the *less* government there is, the better things are. He has little or no trust in governments to *ever* protect their citizens fully, and every expectation that the whim of some deluded leader could at any time devastate any citizen’s life. The old boy knows from direct experience that institutional violence might strike the individual at any time from out of the blue; and at any level from the trivial to the cataclysmic.

Anyone surveying the historical and contemporary global political scene will probably find themselves hard-pressed to deny that the old boy’s gloomy assessment of state and institutional power is as accurate now as it was then. Yet, there is also the fact that many people are generally more afraid of living without ‘strong’ government than living with it, possibly partly explained by the observation that true freedom, as Sartre expressed it, can be a terrifying apprehension of isolation and vulnerability[[28]](#footnote-28).

The popular wisdom is that people group together to form states in an affiliation to safeguard lives and property. However, Lao Zi warns us that once this over-arching governmental power is created, it must then be controlled, and its ambit clearly defined and limited; or it will take on a life of its own; and not necessarily one which is always beneficial to the constituent citizenry. The old boy’s verdict is that for the state as for the individual, the ultimate balance and the ultimate unity is found in the moderate centre, with suitable exercise of restraint to key to keeping on the way of greater good for all.

In the old boy’s view then, a weak government is *infinitely* preferable to a strong one. The nature of enantiodromia within the ebb and flow of the Dao, is that injudicious exercise of massive power will inevitably attract massive resistance, and retaliation. However, if the government is kept weak and uncertain, this is far less likely to occur. Plus, for a weak and more vulnerable government, sensing and reacting positively to the *real* needs of citizens is clearly the best survival strategy.

The old boy would approve heartily of some of the systemic inefficiencies of *real* democracy, but perhaps not so much of some of the contemporary oligarchies claiming *they* are democratic; the idea that governments should be saddled with an officially sanctioned and elected opposition for their full terms would delight his sense of natural justice. He might also remind us in this context that this fundamental provision of true democracy also fits naturally with the Daoist principle that stresses the reconciliation of opposites as the means to wisdom.

In deliberately introducing weakness at the heart of the process, in the form of obligatory public consultation, and a forced rapprochement for every step taken, tendencies towards radicalisation can be slowed if not entirely thwarted, and the focus of governmental concern remains on its citizenry, and somewhere around the middle ground; the place of unity and the Dao. As the verses above demonstrate; from this apparent weakness springs the strength and unity of liberal nations and the beginnings of a template for the moderation of any corporate organisation that Lao Zi would surely have affirmed.

Of course it would not be the way of Dao if the old man’s central maxim in all this did not encompass a measure of paradox; our institutions are *always* stronger and better when they are deliberately *weakened* from within; and of course we should not forget that the highest of our institutions are still only the servants of the lowest of the citizens...

41.

The wisest students seek the whole with all their resolution and ability.

An average student seeks it only when the thought arises.

The foolish student laughs out loud at the thought of seeking.

The highest good will always earn the laughter of the foolish.

So it is said that in journeying towards the whole:

The brightest of guiding lights may appear dull,

The quickest way forward may be a return to beginnings,

The easiest of ways might seem cluttered with obstacles,

The highest essence may be found at the lowest point,

That which is pure may first appear as unclean,

Abundant merit may at first seem insufficient,

The strength in merit may be seen as weakness,

The reality of merit may not be recognised.

The whole has no boundaries.

And the greatest work takes longer to complete,

The highest of notes are hardest to hear,

The greatest of forms has no shape.

The greatest of good is concealed within the unnamed.

Yet the journey brings all things to fulfilment.

41.

The one comes from the greatest good.

And from that one — the two.

From these two comes three,

And from the three — the whole of existence.

The whole of existence is a blending of mighty principles,

The harmony born of the receptive in partnership with the creative.

Although insignificance is not associated with great renown,

The best of supreme leaders describe themselves this way.

And, by being thus diminished, grow in stature.

What others have also told you, I shall tell you now:

Those who choose violence — are punished by violence.

This is an essential and self-evident truth.

43.

The softest and most yielding thing in the world,

Flows easily to envelop and enclose the hardest.

The apparently insubstantial cannot be denied entrance,

It diffuses into everything solid and material — all pervasive.

To teach the great truths without defining statement,

To achieve a great work from doing nothing.

This is something understood by few.

Dynamic spirit of stillness; omnipresent non-substance, shadowy whole, indistinct source, amorphous unity, veiled truth, the ever-flowing, yet rock-solid base of all that is. irrational source of fulfilment, shapeless constant and unnameable beginning of all things. What we hear and see of this Dao essence is never categorical; it is like a series of short glimpses at the peripheral edge of vision. CG Jung once said that transcendent objects could *only* be described in terms of paradox[[29]](#footnote-29). Lao Zi would say that the whole, the Dao, is the beginning and end of all paradox; they would not be in disagreement.

Peddlers of wholesale religion assure the Godless that all that is required to live in the joy of the divine light is 'faith'. It does not sound like very much to ask and surely even the meanest among us can muster a modicum of this 'faith'; especially if the prize is to live in peace, joy and harmony forever…

Faith we are told earnestly, is all that we need. Rarely is anything said about how we can give what we do not have. How does one, in practical terms, go about acquiring this faith; and should one even attempt to do so? The old boy would probably remind us that faith is a slippery concept that often masks deception. He might also declare that real ‘faith’ cannot be mustered by any normal act of will that remains totally sincere. Faith is something received; not manufactured.

Though Lao Zi is never a cynic, he would undoubtedly question whether or not any particular professed 'faith' was really that primal surge towards unity in the Godhead, or just an intellectual abandonment of sorts, perhaps some inconsequential ‘ism’ masquerading as ultimate purpose in life. For many, the concept of ‘faith’, if it is not outright dishonesty, is perhaps the mental equivalent of shrugging the shoulders and accepting the advisability of an each-way bet; one may pay lip-service to the ideal, yet lack any real involvement or sense of work on the self; something in the manner of an agnostic accepting the last rites - ‘just in case...’

Lao Zi does not ask the individual for anything that is not within their power to give. All that is required of the seeker embarking on the Way is the will to continue, and the openness to accept the truth, the whole truth and *everything* that is the truth.



In the Jungian scheme of things, organised religions are characterised as ‘psychotherapeutic systems’ and any controversy concerning the ‘actual’ existence of any particular deity is of little import or relevance compared to the undeniable reality and universality of the ‘god-image’ in the normal healthy psyche, the same phenomenon that the old boy would describe as the ‘unnameable’:

The idea of God is an absolutely necessary psychological function of an irrational nature, which has nothing whatever to do with the question of God’s existence. The human intellect can never answer this question, still less give any proof of God. Moreover, such proof is superfluous, for the idea of an all-powerful divine being is present everywhere, unconsciously if not consciously, because it is an archetype…[[30]](#footnote-30)

Jung scoffs at the relentless materialism of those who seek (or profess to have) a scientific proof of the presence of God; those who might feel naively impelled to probe the heavens with powerful telescopes looking for the pearly gates. Those who insist on the exclusive existence of only ‘their’ God as a part of *their* cherished system of being are simply wrong in Jungian terms. As with Lao Zi himself, Jung’s interpretation of reality does not depend on any external divinity. Both the transcendental impulse towards a unified wholeness, and its means of fulfilment, reside in the unconscious recesses of each individual mind.

Interestingly, in this sense, one may live a life steeped in the wisdom associated with religion and spirituality, and yet still be, by any strict definition of the word, a confirmed atheist; the old boy himself has no problem at all with this.

It is not necessary to be ‘religious’ to understand the essential meaning of religion and its most fundamental function. It is the same goal outlined in the *Dao de Jing*: to give life purpose and, through inner contemplation, seek the fulfilment of the individual in integration with a cosmic whole. When we surrender our ‘reality’, our rationality, to the Dao, or to the pursuit of the God-within by any other name; we are sinking into the uncharted depths of the self. When we emerge; we are reborn. This process is not without its dangers, as every person considering this course instinctively knows. The process of rebirth and salvation always implies some preliminary self-destruction.

The alternative to this ‘leap of faith’ for the religious, or, for those on the path to the greater good; ‘surrender to the call’ or ‘total commitment’ is to simply adopt the creed and observe the forms. There are benefits in this lesser commitment, and it can be made before any final binding pledge of the self to take the way towards real personal fulfilment is made. While this lesser way is not yet the direct way to the Dao, it can have its life advantages, for example, uniting the individual with a peer group which is protective of family life and supportive of individuals who piously demonstrate group values; even if secretly, no ultimate commitment of the self has been made.

There is a strong moral component to every religion; an adherent lives by an adopted code which was (originally at least) designed to promote the greater good for all. This something that offers family groups some basic protection and a sense of belonging, and is also why most religious commitment is simply a matter of geography rather than any considered individual commitment, our innate tendency is primarily to take the simplest course, bow to peer pressure, and to worship the local deity. In this sense, ritual observance can have its advantages in solidly embedding the individual in the protective embrace of his society; it is just that ritual adherence alone will not suffice for enlightenment. In the old boy’s terms, this choosing of form over substance represents a deviation on the true path towards the Dao.

The alternative to this form of religious observance, and the adoption of this form of moral commitment (but also the practical consideration that often dictates its insincere adoption), is the potential for brutality and barbarism that is prevalent in many societies when *no* commitment *at all* is made. Yet even this ‘halfway house’ process is not always trouble-free. The old boy would sigh and confirm the truth that *anyone* can be persecuted for both having a belief *and* for not having a belief; and, even when the final undertaking of faith *is* made, the potential for complications is not diminished. There is a surprisingly thin dividing line between the tranquillity of the sage imparting his message of enlightenment in tones of quiet assurance; and the zealot seeking forcible conversion by carving it into the flesh of his victims in lines of blood…

44.

Your good name or your good self — which matters more?

Your good self or your great wealth — which matters more?

To gain or to lose — which is more troublesome?

Accumulating riches may lead to great expense.

Amassing goods may lead to heavy loss.

The wise know when they have enough.

In knowing when to stop they avoid disappointment and find harmony,

Being in harmony, they avoid misfortune and endure.

45.

The greatest perfection may appear as ordinary,

Yet never outlive its usefulness.

The greatest totality may appear inconsequential,

Yet use will not diminish it.

So, the straightest way may seem to have many turns,

The greatest skills appear unpolished,

And great eloquence seen as a combat with words.

Movement overwhelms cold, as stillness conquers heat.

In calmness and tranquility, the whole of the world is put in order.

Where do we begin? Which way should we go?

The world is full of illusion, nothing is what it seems, and life is full of unresolved contradiction. How is a person to be sure that they are not deceived? It is true that traditional, organised religions will most often suggest that you put your faith in the deity and accept whatever outcome is ordained. This may be good advice, but only providing that the person being advised has already acknowledged, *and* has faith in, the reality of some supreme omnipresence. If they have not; then this is simply one more frustrating dead end.

Organised religion *itself* differs on what constitutes right and what wrong; if there had not been some fairly broad areas of disagreement then Protestantism could never have split into the many hundreds of denominations it has become. Established religions everywhere are in an advanced state of fragmentation, with often vicious rivalries between the splinter groups. This dissolution of faith is part of the modern day dilemma of church hierarchies; organisations that frequently place particular favoured dogmatic interpretations of scripture above the principles of unity and reconciliation. In Jungian terms, they have lost touch with their reason for being:

It is not ethical principles, however lofty, or creeds however orthodox, that lay the foundation for the freedom and autonomy of the individual, but simply and solely the empirical awareness, the incontrovertible experience of an intensely personal, reciprocal relationship between man and an extramundane authority which acts as a counterpoise to the ‘world’ and its ‘reason’. [[31]](#footnote-31)

For Jung as for Lao Zi himself, the ‘extramundane authority’ is the reality of the true nature of the inner self. His thoughts coincide closely with the old boy's advice, which as ever, is self-contained. Those seeking the unity of the Dao need no external reference to any postulated deity, all that is required is for us to start with the simplest things, our own selves and our real place in the world. Furthermore, should this exercise prove confronting in forcing us to abandon some previously treasured, but complacent self-assessment, so much the better. We will now be in a position to experience the paradoxical freedom that comes when one is able to recognise and accept one’s own limitations.

In looking inwards, and in realistic assessment of the mixed-up jumble of emotion, knowledge and experience that is the inner self, sooner or later the soul-searcher might begin to realise that some confusion and misunderstanding is an inevitable part of a normal life, and is nothing to fear. It might also then be realised that without these spontaneous and uncontrollable elements of the self; impressions, feelings and thoughts which suddenly flash into consciousness, there would be no surprise, no amusement, no sudden impulse of joy, and no laughter.

To be able to say, ‘I really don’t understand that, but I can accept it and I can feel happy about accepting it,’ is to take a first step on the way. Even a neurosis, though characterised by Jung as a sign that a person has lost touch with their innermost self, is also indicative of someone who, ‘has not yet found a new form for his finest aspirations,[[32]](#footnote-32) there is a positive side to everything.

When frustration saps the energy, perhaps it is time to relax. We do not need to agonise over absolutely every little detail. Fulfilment is not the reward we reap for extraordinary effort and extraordinary endurance. The goal is at the moderate centre of things and we must never forget that the principle of least effort for best effect is the old boy's guiding precept.

We must not fall into the trap of thinking that the Dao is something rare and strange, and only to be gained only by exceptional effort. The Dao is to be found in the simplest things. To take a contemporary analogy, think for a moment, about what extraordinary beauty *is*. True beauty is not rare, it is found all around us, all the time. To be more specific, what is it that constitutes truly exceptional physical beauty? Science has considered this question in an empirical way, with some fascinating results.

In an experiment conducted some years ago, **citation** psychologists attempted to discern what physical ‘beauty’ *is* by showing snapshots of hundreds of faces, both male and female, and then getting their subjects to grade them on the basis of attractiveness[[33]](#footnote-33). They then used computer technology, to ‘average out’ shape, size and position of features such as nose, eye, mouth etc. It is perhaps no surprise to note that the more the faces were averaged out to build the composite picture, the more beautiful they were deemed to be.

The conclusion? Physical beauty is not found at the radical extreme of human experience; beauty is the *average* and the more average a person’s features are, the more attractive they are invariably judged to be.

The Dao is something like that, a place where opposites are reconciled in a moderate centre to create a breath-taking vision of; not perfection really, but wholeness…

46.

When the greater good prevails,

War-horses plough the fields of the state and spread manure.

When the greater good is lost,

The war-horses gather by the borders while the fields are neglected.

There is no sin greater than to covet beyond reasonable need,

No disaster worse than discontent in the midst of plenty,

No greater misfortune than riches gained at the expense of others.

Contentment knows when enough is truly enough.

47.

To travel widely — is not always to gain knowledge of the world.

To observe closely — is not how one learns the way of heaven,

Much effort can be expended in going far, yet seeing less.

The wise can see the truth from where they sit,

Identify the essence from where they are,

Do what must be done without the appearance of being busy.

48.

In schooling — new facts are acquired daily and added to the sum.

In pursuit of enlightenment — the unimportant facts are discarded.

As less and less become necessary — inaction is achieved,

When inaction is achieved, all that is necessary has been done.

The world is best governed by this minimal action,

The supreme leader who interferes in this natural order,

Is not equal to the task.

Wisdom versus knowledge, the old boy returns to the point again and again. We are all easily persuaded that enlightenment requires *something* we need to obtain; more knowledge, more humility, more insight, more understanding, more learning, more personal strength, more opportunity, more time, more effort…

Equally, we are accustomed to believe that 'action' equates to 'progress,' if we busy ourselves with the task at hand, we will inevitably receive due recognition for our dynamism; or so we like to assure ourselves. Conversely, if we sit around idly, perhaps we never deserved the benefits of any ultimate reward anyway…

The reality is that our work ethic is culturally instilled behaviour. Since the industrial revolution, people have worked longer and harder than at any other time in history, our technology and our know-how have not brought us the long-promised leisure we once expected, if anything, we work longer and harder than ever before. This raises the question; is industry serving the needs of people, or are people serving the needs of industry? The old boy is scornful of all forms of ill-considered and pointless action, if our vision is to penetrate the muddiest of waters, we must stop swirling them around first and have the patience to wait until stillness brings clarity.

Work on the self is more than just slavish adherence to a cultural work ethic. Those engaged in seeking the highest good need to understand that sometimes, time spent in quiet contemplation is worth more than any sustained energy-sapping effort. One of the hardest lessons we must learn is that we are truly sufficient unto ourselves. Realisation *is in the self;* and it is f*or the self.*

Fulfilment for the individual is never dependent on achieving some rarefied intellectual height; a simple child-like comprehension of the world is more than sufficient. Consider (and celebrate) Winnie-the-Pooh as your example, *that* particular Daoist adept needed nothing special in his day to celebrate the fact of his fulfilment and achievement of satisfaction. He was content to simply, and sincerely, wish all his friends a ‘very happy Thursday…’ [[34]](#footnote-34)

Somehow, we need to deal with, and as a first step at least acknowledge; our cynicism, our prejudice, our predispositions of attitude, our accumulated doubt, our unbridled ambition, our self-deception... all in all, it all sounds like a very serious business indeed, but latter day Daoist adepts such as Alan Watts[[35]](#footnote-35) would dismiss this inappropriate mind set with an understanding sigh and a grin; and tell you to lighten up; feel the sun on your face; go dancing, take a break, watch a sunset, love someone or something, read a book!

The old boy never suggests there is a bitter pill to swallow in attainment of the ultimate essence. The size of the mountain you must climb to find the true nature of the Dao is a thing of your own making. When you can see the humour in your condition, you are already on the way...

When the human condition; *your* condition, causes you *not* recrimination, *not* doubt, *not* anxiety, *not* fear, but a huge and uncontrollable belly-laugh at the random vagaries of fate, the old boy will be laughing right there along with you; with the happy tears rolling off his white whiskers - as the mental gates swing wide open…

49.

The great leader cannot be swayed by personal whim,

The leader’s mind reflects only the mind of the people.

The great leader treats those that are good — as good,

And those that are not good — the same.

In this, the greater good is served.

The greatest leader treats those who are unfailing — unfailingly,

And those who fail — in like manner.

In doing this, insufficiency is averted.

The greatest leader is the focus and the distraction of the state,

Through this high office, all people find their place,

And yet the simplicity of childhood is maintained.

50.

Every life may strive for unity and wholeness — or accept dissolution.

One third of humanity are affirmative of life,

And one third condemned to live it.

The middle third passes unremarkably from birth to death,

But, having valued their mortality over total being

1. in turn accept their condemnation.

Those who value their total being, walk without fear,

They expect neither aggression nor misfortune.

And so appear to live a charmed existence.

Having committed to the fullness of life

1. Death has no hold over them.

51.

All that is — begins with acceptance of life’s vital essence,

All that ensues — is nourished by goodness,

Substance gives a form to what is good,

Contingency gives it shape.

All living things depend upon the indivisible one.

To respect and honour this natural order is not required,

Yet it is wholesome to do so.

From the formless aggregate of this wholeness — life is offered.

From this totality comes nourishment and growth,

And from that — maturity and attainment,

And from that — quietude and sanctuary.

In giving without taking,

In serving without recognition,

In guiding yet not dominating,

The greatest good is revealed as primal virtue.

52.

Think back to the beginning of all beginnings,

The uniqueness that is the mother lode of our world.

When you recognise the mother,

Then know her kind.

When you can relate all things with their source,

You will know the essence that can shelter and protect your life.

Tantalisingly close, accessible to all persons in all situations. The enlightenment of the Dao *may* be just a heartbeat away, and *everything* the individual needs for its attainment is to be found within. Yet, here again the old boy is telling us that most people will, almost certainly, miss out. Most of humanity will *not* find any kind of ultimate unity in the whole in their lifetimes. The old boy is well aware and resigned to the fact that many individuals live lives of barely conscious toil, their awareness stunted and their mental horizons limited to considerations of the immediate problems of subsistence.

Many people simply do not seek spiritual goals. This is not a criticism, it is an admission that, civilised though we may consider ourselves to be, there yet exists within our society, some people with fundamental needs that remain unfulfilled; food, an income, a roof overhead, job security, sufficient self-respect to be an effective family member... These folk are the innocent victims of society.

Meantime, others, who are not condemned to scrabble for bare existence, are still happy to accept a brief, and materially focussed life, before inevitable dissolution. These are the people mostly tied to the limited position dictated by their particular ‘ism;’ those who will never catch more than a distant glimpse of the bigger picture. Unless they change their life focus; the old boy is not for them.

For those who do take up the challenge of self-fulfilment; and of ‘valuing their total being’, the old boy offers a tantalising vision. These people, if their quest is a genuine appreciation of the greater good applied in every situation; have a very good prospect of appearing to their contemporaries as blessed by contentment and good fortune. Without appearing forceful or aggressive, they will be advocates of truth and justice, respected in their judgements, and the natural leaders, who command respect when it matters. Yet even among this group, the ones who take up the challenge of forming that personal connection with ultimate things; a significant number might still eventually fall by the wayside and settle for lesser consolations than the distant promise of unity of self into the cosmic whole.

One thing that should be remembered is the old boy's advice that the ultimate unity is *never* accessible by the adoption of a particular form or process; it is more readily defined as commitment to the higher principles of the greater good, and most definitely *not* some dilettante intellectual dalliance. Rather, it is the consummation of our reality..

In the words of CG Jung; who also speaks tellingly of the Dao essence as the ‘spiritual adventure of our time’; This ultimate is the ‘exposure of human consciousness to the undefined and undefinable[[36]](#footnote-36):

Agnosticism maintains that it does not possess any knowledge of God, or of anything metaphysical, overlooking the fact that one never *possesses* a metaphysical belief but is *possessed* by it. [[37]](#footnote-37)



The next several lines are the old man’s account of what can go wrong in the search for the whole. The perils of the soul-searcher are many: and these are just some of the means by which an individual may be diverted from the Way of the Dao as great journey:

Use no unnecessary words,

Be on guard against your perceptions.

And knowing stillness — live a full life.

In being diverted by the inconsequential,

In indulging idle sensation,

And in being busy — life's potential is abandoned.

Have awareness of the bigger picture,

Do not fight the ebb and flow of nature.

Use the light without to illumine the sight within.

Remember — insight prevents misfortune,

When learning the perseverance of constancy.

53.

When striving towards unity, a little sense will suffice,

The great way is the easy way.

Yet — there are by-roads seductive for many.

Do not be tempted to stray.

When the leaders of the state live in opulent grandeur,

Weeds choke the crops and the people go hungry.

When high society wears exclusive finery,

And ceremonial occasion diverts attention from essentials,

And the finest foods and rarest wines are reserved for the few,

And the few have possessions neither used nor appreciated.

While all others live with need.

Then robber barons have taken over the state,

And the great way to unity has been lost.

What is it that happens to an individual when considerations of personal wealth and possession take precedence over the higher ideals of fulfilment within the Tao, and the ideal of personal integration? The old boy has no doubts on the matter at all. This is a negative, self-destructive mindset that fosters the growth of intolerance, injustice, meanness and inhumane action. When this ideology is applied at the corporate and state level, *that* is when organisations become corrupted and the injustices and inequalities become systemic.

An effective community leader must have an ongoing appreciation of the fact that the powers of state are given in service of the needs of *all* of the people. To avoid the seductive lure of personal aggrandisement, it is helpful to retain a keen awareness that no amount of privilege, prestige, or wealth can bring personal fulfilment, unless the central issues of personal reconciliation through work on the self are addressed.

Too often, a privileged sector of a society falls prey to the temptation to use some slight or passing advantage to entrench their position in society at the expense of an underclass; thereby tipping the balance of power in favour of their own comfort and personal enrichment. That these people have abandoned the way of Dao, and any hope of personal fulfilment in falling victim to their own greed may be of little consolation to the citizens whose wealth will now be pillaged in taxes and whose labour may be forcibly diverted; perhaps for generations, to the enrichment of this chosen few.

This situation, where the polarisation of advantage and disadvantage arises repeatedly in different nations, was perfectly familiar to the old boy, and has re-occurred many times throughout history. Yet, even those leaders of state publicly recognised as the poorest performers and the worst offenders; those with extensive records of favouring an elite, fostering cronyism, and using legislation as a tool to perpetuate injustice. Even those most apparently culpable of institutional failures will stoutly and invariably maintain that they have done their *very* best in attempting to fulfil their duties to their people, and mostly they will even believe this to be true...

The old boy knows why this happens. Once again, this is a failure of vision; the leadership has accepted something less than the reality of the true big picture in formulating its decisions. Perhaps, the leadership is simply lacking in the necessary qualities of honesty and integrity, and in some cases, the governing elite is possibly seduced by some passing faddish idea; something like the frequently adopted precept that the 'good of the economy' is the same as the 'good of the people.'

Growth in wealth, as the old boy will confirm, is actually a very poor determinant of the overall health of a state. The key factor is that the distribution and apportionment of this wealth has been carefully, and fairly, considered. While stock markets soar and property portfolios experience boom conditions, millionaires are created and business expands. Unfortunately, it is not so uncommon that unemployment and poverty may also increase in tandem, while levels of discontent may multiply, and the quality of life, for many, decrease. Low interest rates, favourable exchange rates, and the record dividends paid by multi-national corporations are of little import to street people, despised minorities, sweatshop workers supplying rich countries from third world hovels and the working poor in every jurisdiction.

The economy *is* important, but it is still something *much less* than the whole. Harmony, justice, tolerance, tranquility, peace of mind; these desirable things arise when the leaders of societies recognise an essential truth - and in doing so, raise their eyes from their financial bottom lines, to a consideration of what makes us human.

We are not a market — we are a people.

54.

Knowing your roots, knowing your origins — this is your reality,

What you hold tight will not slip loose,

And the lessons of history will not be lost.

Give life to the totality within yourself — and achieve fulfilment.

Energise unity within the family — and achieve abundance,

Vitalise community value in the village — and contentment will grow,

Activate unity within the state — and there will be goodness in plenty,

Awaken harmony in the world — and virtue will be all pervasive

Be honest when looking at yourself,

Apply family values to family issues,

And community values to community issues,

Consider the national issues when looking at the state,

And the absolute picture when looking at the world as whole.

In proper contemplation lies the enlightenment of the greater good.

55.

One who knows the virtue of the greater good is like a newborn boy,

Unperturbed by his environment,

Unafraid of life's dangers,

Untouched by the pressures of earthly living.

Soft-boned and apparently fragile — yet his grip is strong.

Knowing nothing of the union of the sexes — yet he shows his virile potential.

Shrieking his small discontents yet not becoming hoarse —he is in total harmony.

Harmony brings constancy and constancy the inward vision,

Acceptance saves the weariness of wasted endeavour.

Add your energy to the natural rhythm,

And take your strength from the whole.

Those fighting the great ebb and flow will not succeed.

Action is justified in its scale by the context in which it is taken, and what is appropriate at state level may be quite wrong in the context of family affairs. So, what then is the big picture? Correct action as the old boy sees it, is a matter of first discerning the actual context of events. Unless you are acquainted with *all* the relevant facts, how can an appropriate decision be made, a policy implemented, or an approach formulated? Wisdom lies in tailoring the solution to the problem; foolhardiness in trying to make the problem fit the preferred solution.

CG Jung was a great believer in the pre-eminent importance of the individual in society, just as was Lao Zi himself. Jung once remarked that all the great events that constitute world history pale to insignificance beside the inner life of the individual. All of the monumental and momentous happenings in the world are founded in the hidden resources of ordinary people. We are not, in truth, just the passive observers of events; we are the makers of our world[[38]](#footnote-38).

The rules to be followed in determining the criteria for individual action are few: Never mistake the visible symptoms for the hidden problem, do not waste energy on a lost cause, and be totally honest and fair in your dealings. Also, be aware that, although it may not be that difficult to fool yourself; the fool will still be you.

Remember not to fight against what is natural (nature will always prevail) and always listen to your intuition; but, at the same time, be sure you have all the facts. Always remember that the goal is peace and harmony and that all other considerations are secondary. Finally, have regard to the cliché that those who do not learn by their mistakes are inevitably condemned to repeat them.

This last point is made with respect to the fact that clichés attain their oft-repeated status because they generally contain the kernel of some vital truth...

56.

The greatest truths are often deliberated in privacy,

The greatest deceits are often widely preached in the public domain.

So use no unnecessary and meaningless declarations,

And be on guard against those that you may hear.

Let your sharpness become well roundedness,

Untangle your thoughts,

Value what you know about yourself,

And not what others know about you.

Be at one.

Having done this — no extreme can sway you,

And your thoughts will have value for all.

57.

How do you win the people? — With fairness and justice.

How do you win the war? — With resourcefulness and surprise.

How do you win the whole? — Without strife!

You will know this when you recognise no conflict.

As rules and regulations proliferate within the state,

The people become poorer.

When the populace arm themselves,

The state is troubled

When novelty and artfulness occupy the community,

Discontent becomes rife.

When the citizens trouble themselves in learning the letter of the law,

Theft and robbery become a scourge in the state.

The wise among leaders do not try to reconstruct their people,

And by this restraint — the people are free to develop themselves.

The wise among leaders prefer stillness to action,

And by this restraint — the people are permitted to advance themselves.

The wise among leaders do not concern themselves in trivial regulation,

And by this restraint — the people are able to prosper.

The wise in, their freedom from need, are an example to the people,

And in this simplicity — they approach closer to the greatest good.

58.

When the state is governed with restraint,

There is goodness and simplicity.

When the state is governed with harshness,

There is conspiracy and equivocation.

The great cycle includes both great joy and great grief.

Elation succeeds the misery behind the happiness that follows despair.

How can we cope with this?

In seeking the whole, the path that appears straight may yet prove a diversion,

And even best intention may be put to evil ends.

This perplexity has occupied many lives.

The wise maintain faith in their personal vision — and avoid confrontation.

They connect with the world — and yet are sufficient in themselves.

They nurture inner awareness — but not at the expense of another,

They know that what has most brilliance,

Can not only illuminate — but also dazzle and blind.

Justice, integrity, understanding and compassion; these are some of the old boy's ruling precepts. Lao Zi is just the kind of person to support a liberal humanitarian legal system where the same set of rights is guaranteed for all.

Or is he?

When the citizens trouble themselves in learning the letter of the law,

Theft and robbery become a scourge in the state

Justice is not just a noble concept, it is forever intertwined with the law, and the law is not just a list of statutes. Legislative bodies are institutions of state, and the old boy has already warned us that the institutions of state are not always entities to be trusted. In fact, he has already made it clear that out legislative and other institutions may be regarded as stronger, and better when a weakness or vulnerability is deliberately introduced into them. There are numerous examples from both historical and contemporary sources to support the view that the law does *not* always serve the greater good…

For the last century or more in the west, legislation has been a major growth industry. There are twice as many acts on the statute books now as there were a hundred years ago, and plenty more on the drawing board. But, the question the old boy might prime us to ask is: do we have twice as much justice? With each passing year, the law becomes more complex, more specialised, and more technical. The downside of this sophistication is that familiar muddying of the waters the old boy is constantly on guard against; the law becomes less understandable, less accessible and more difficult to interpret and comply with.

Suppose *all* the statutes were suddenly abolished, and a mountain of legislation vanished without trace; would this make any difference at all provided that you were still able to go to court and have a group of your educated peers decide reasonably if something was right or wrong? For a genuine traveler on the great way, as for any highly principled person; this is the crux of the matter, justice is simply the proper determination of right from wrong without fear or favour. The old boy would ask: why complicate it?

Throughout history however, the practice of law has not always and purely been about justice. Not only does the law frequently fail in respectability by lending itself to be used as an instrument of political control, it also frequently violates the principle that simplicity is preferable; and that explicitness and clarity best serve integrity.

The law as defined in many of our complex statutes deviates from the ideal of integrity when it becomes something that can be manipulated by criminals and the unscrupulous to serve their own ends. In addition, leaders of society can, and do, misuse the law sometimes in oppressing their own peoples and serving their own interests. Unjust statutes can be used to entrench a ruling elite or discriminate against a minority. Loopholes in convoluted legislation enable individuals and groups to escape retribution from actions deserving blame or censure; because ‘there is no law against it’ or, 'technically, it was not illegal...'

Justice on the other hand, is very different from 'law'. Justice is, by definition, the proper application of wise judgement in the determination of right and wrong; and it is a quality either present, or absent. Though some written guidelines may be welcome; it does not require a legal system at all; just the necessary respected wisdom, in focused deliberations on the advancement of the greater good.

The old boy reminds us that the law *should* be the tool that assists the judge in proper determination of the greater good; not an instrument of subversion through obfuscation and improper application.

Lao Zi would have no time for ‘the law’ as an elitist club with a focus on personal enrichment for its practitioners, and certainly no respect for any legal system in which 'technicalities' might be allowed to prejudice the just outcome of a case. The very idea of the litigant with the largest bank balance getting the best access to ‘justice’ would be as much anathema to him, as it is (in reality) to the poor people on the receiving end of such discrimination.

For the old man the questions are all quite simple: Is there equal access to genuine justice for all citizens? Does the legal system adequately service the greatest good? And if not, then why not?

Though truth-seekers might support the moral order and incorporate the principles of justice into the very fibres of their being; there is still good reason to be suspicious of both the law, and the people who (apparently) so zealously and properly uphold its virtues. Might not the perceived 'rightness' of ‘the law’ be sometimes just another substitute for the *real* object of any spiritual quest? Jung was one thinker who had his doubts:

Observance of custom and laws can easily be a cloak for a lie so subtle that our fellow human beings are unable to detect it. It may help us to escape all criticism; we may even be able to deceive ourselves in the belief of our obvious righteousness. But deep down, below the surface of the average man’s conscience, he hears a voice whispering, ‘There is something not right,’ no matter how much his rightness is supported by public opinion or by the moral code[[39]](#footnote-39).

A slavish and unquestioning adherence to the principles of law might just be a dogmatic position that stifles spiritual progress for those who adopt it. Like the imitation of Christ; as espoused by those choosing to live by a religious system, but lacking a religious conviction, it can be the acceptance of second best and the abrogation of individual responsibility in empty ritual and convention, another example of acceptance of form over substance.

The old boy is emphatic in offering us no hope of prizes awarded for blind obedience. The success of any personal spiritual quest for fulfilment depends entirely on the sincerity of work being done on the self, and direct apprehension of the substance sought; but never on the occasion of any passive acceptance of procedural customs and sacraments.

59.

The wise ruler governs the people and serves heaven with the same restraint

With this condition — falseness is avoided and the correct way taken.

Along this course — integrity and wisdom accumulate.

As this abundance arises — all things are possible.

In this environment — there are no limits.

One, who is restrained, yet knows no limits — is a fit ruler.

This is the mother principle of all government.

With these deep roots and with this firm base,

The greater good endures.

60.

Government of a state is best done lightly — like cooking a small fish.

When government is in harmony with nature's cycle,

No evil can prevail.

Its potential is balanced by the presence of the greater good.

The wise accept the balance that brings no harm to self or others,

And the merit that accrues with this acceptance.

61.

A large state is like a great river,

The place where every separate stream unites,

The mother principle is like the union of the streams.

Flowing to the low places — in its depth and stillness is strength,

In this submission — the masculine principle is engulfed and held.

So the great state, in acceding to a smaller, will annexe it,

And the small state in deferring to the larger — conquers by affiliation.

To overcome with restraint requires the capacity for submission.

And in submission lies the possibility of greatest advance.

Great nations need to grow — small nations need strength in alliance.

Each gets what it needs,

But larger states must not forget this greatest truth:

Ultimate accomplishment lies in yielding.

Practised restraint and absolute integrity; The old boy places these characteristics very high on the list of required qualities for those with an eye towards personal growth as an ultimate life goal. Restraint avoids excess, integrity avoids falseness, and with this, the way towards absolute success is cleared. With just these two attributes the ‘deep roots and firm base’ are established.

These fundamental qualities are representative of both the dynamic nature of any individual striving towards the Dao and the primary characteristics of the very best leaders in our various institutions, organisations and communities.

Jean-Paul Sartre argues for a collective benefit in making this personal commitment towards furtherance of the greater good.[[40]](#footnote-40) He is saying, in effect that when a person takes responsibility for the development of self, that person, in choosing the greater good, is choosing the best for all humanity. In making this point, Sartre here builds an intellectual monument to the intelligent analysis of consciousness and makes a point that the old boy would absolutely agree with; though it does come from a totally unexpected perspective.

Lao Zi has no such elaborated grounds for his affirmation of this truth; he just recognises intuitively that each person who consciously chooses to do what is right, and *only* what is right, is incrementally engaged in making the world a better place.



Victory through surrender! A very typically Lao Zi expression of paradoxical reality; and one almost echoed by Jung in a phrase that might have been spoken by the old boy himself: ‘Every victory contains the germ of future defeat[[41]](#footnote-41).’

Any enterprise depending on the application of violence to achieve success is facing an uphill struggle, and one that; though it may provide some short term gain or satisfaction, has little to do with any proper advancement towards ultimate wholeness. Lao Zi will explain by demonstrating to us that the Dao has the fluid quality of water; which implies that the greater good flows always, and quite inexorably, from the high ground of the victor to the lowest position of the vanquished. Submission therefore, is according to the old boy, not simply the last resort of the individual or the state facing total defeat; it is a recommended tactic that avoids both the debilitating confrontation and the consequent diminution of power a hostile engagement would inevitably bring.

Submission is this sense is exercising restraint, it is *going with the flow* and, far from implying any final or ultimate surrender, it leaves open the possibility that factors other than the capacity for violence may eventually rule the day. In much the same way that China eventually absorbed and subsumed the hordes of Mongol aggressors, and the Norman conquerors of England became upper-crust English society, losing (as did the Mongols in China) even their native language in the process...

To put this in a context appropriate to any individual on the way; in any personal search for ultimate truth, egotism tends towards the use of force; *and* simultaneously fosters the inability to submit when good sense demands (since submission is often perceived as weakness). The old boy however, will tell you in no uncertain terms that ‘ego’ is in essence, a hard and brittle substance and quite antithetical towards the fluid nature of the Dao.

In doing this, he might also ask you to consider: What happens to something hard and brittle; when it meets something powerful, yet fluid; and yet the two cannot freely mingle? The answer is of course, that the hard and brittle is engulfed and vanishes. The trick in actually allowing this to happen to the self; to sink voluntarily into the whole; is to think of it in terms of a tactical disengagement rather than a crushing defeat. For a naturally humble person like the old boy, this may be no problem at all. The rest of us may need to learn the hard way…



62.

In the ultimate unity is safe haven for all.

For the good — it is the sanctuary and sufficiency they strive to reach.

For the low and degraded — it is asylum and the agency of salvation.

It is not the good or bad of previous deeds that counts,

But the words and deeds of right here and right now.

What is the greatest gift that can be offered to the nation?

Not the rarest, most opulent of gems — not the finest livestock,

But the wisdom born of unity in the greater good.

Why is this valued above all?

It is the goal of all endeavour, all sustenance and redemption,

In this whole is the greatest bounty of a nation.

63.

Practice control and self-restraint,

Abandon the extreme and value moderation,

Forgo the exotic and savour the modest,

Have care for the small things and consideration for the few,

Seek reconciliation and not vengeance.

In making big advances — take one step at a time,

Remember that all greatness in founded in the small and insignificant.

True greatness is not for those who crave it,

The wise achieve it, but do not want it.

Ill-considered promises lead to bad faith.

Momentous issues need serious consideration,

Do not make light of the difficulties that are real.

But, knowing that no difficulty is insurmountable,

Initiate your first step on the way to ultimate achievement.

64.

The peace is easier to keep than to make,

Trouble is easier to prevent than to deal with,

What is fragile —easily breaks,

What is still small — can be prevented from growing.

Know the dynamics of your situation,

And to prevent confusion — build on what order there is.

Great trees grow from tiny shoots,

Great feats of engineering begin by shifting a handful of dirt,

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,

Beware of the judgment that fails to nurture and maintain the peace that is,

Be on guard against the discord that brings about misfortune.

The wise nurture the peace and avoid disharmony,

In preventing trouble – they also avert conflict.

Exercise care at the very end — as for the very beginning

Or failure may arise at the brink of success,

Maintain the harmony, maintain the focus — all will be good.

Desire only not to waste time and energy on desire,

Value that which you have and which cannot be taken from you,

Acknowledge that your learning may have to be abandoned,

Seek the good in the whole — but do not impose,

See inner harmony with life — but do not control,

Then, refraining from ill-considered action — you will achieve.

Restraint, moderation, care, patience, perseverance, tolerance; these are the hallmarks of the person engaged in proper work on the self, and on the way of the Dao as great journey. It always needs to be understood that the Dao is not something that is rare and quite out of the ordinary, and most certainly *not* something to be gained only by prodigious effort. The old boy will tell you that any journey of a thousand miles is still accomplished by taking just one small step at a time…

For the old boy, 'small' is always good, he recognises that if the fine details are properly taken care of; if all our actions are honest, if real justice is served, and each step taken is for the greater good; then, quite suddenly, all obstacles are overcome. Resistance dissolves and the way, the great journey, becomes (though perhaps somewhat in defiance of all expectation, an easy straightforward progression.

And why should this not be so? When our lives are harmonious and fully in tune with the natural flow of events, then we may safely cease to concern ourselves with the future. After all, the ‘big picture’ we have been thinking so much about is nothing but the accumulation of all these small details; and once the foundations are strong, the edifice of the whole is supported; and now, even though little effort will appear to have been spent, the goal is accomplished.

Lao Zi warns us that ‘need’ and ‘want’ can be our downfall along the way, since our consciousness of them can be a severe obstacle to our progression. After all if the Dao is enlightened contentment, perhaps it is *right there* under our noses *this instant*, and, if I forget for just a moment about the things I want and need, the goal is realised…

In this sense, it is my judgment, my perception, and my evaluation of my own being that decides if I become, like the old boy, a fully rounded person in harmony with the universe, or remain an aspirant; still in possession of hopes dreams and desires, I cannot rid myself of, but which actually represent resistance to all further progress.



65.

Those who first knew the harmony of the whole,

Were circumspect in its revelation to others,

Knowing that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing,

And that before enlightenment comes much work on the self.

To be clever and yet not wise — can be the ruination of the ruler,

To be clever and not yet wise — can be the ruin of the people.

To comprehend these models is a remarkable virtue,

An understanding of depth and great consequence.

This highest virtue strives towards the whole,

And is undeterred from unity even if the path appears to diverge.

By this means the whole can be found.

66.

The rivers and the seas fill the valleys and low places,

And in the ocean — they find their wholeness and unity.

Being the lowest point of the world, the ocean rules supreme.

Know this when seeking to guide the state —

You must have humility in giving service

Know this when seeking to lead the state —

The greatest of all leaders — are followers of the will of the people.

Therefore there is no repression in the rule of the wise,

And no obstruction to the will of the people,

Then the leader earns loyal support and the respect of the people,

And in never being confrontational — is never confronted.

The old boy is making the point here again, that we need to regularly re-evaluate what constitutes our understanding of our ‘highs’ and our ‘lows.’ He tells us that strength and power are not things naturally residing in the high places; but, on the contrary, *true* strength is necessarily in the foundations of things, where it supports all that is above. In a leadership context, every great leader is conscious of, and responsive to, the needs of the citizens in all strata of society. When the old boy tells us that the best leaders are the servants of their people; he means it in the most literal sense.

The wholeness and unity of the Dao essence is represented in these verses by the fluidity of rivers and oceans, which inexorably seek to ‘fill the valleys and lowest places.’ The old boy asks us to have an understanding of ‘depths and great consequence,’ and advises us (perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively at first glance) that when humility is advocated for the individual, it is because this brings one closer to the *lowliness* of the Dao essence. This idea has some resonance with the ideas of Sartre, where on a number of occasions in his work, he speaks of the perception of the ultimate unity/Godhead/Dao as akin to ‘staring into the abyss’ (CITE)

It is probably true to say that we are generally culturally conditioned to equate the ‘greater good’ with the *highest* aspirations of life; and we use the appellation ‘highest’ in the most directly literal sense possible.

Mountain tops are often our metaphorical goals; we ‘ascend’ to glory, we imagine ‘success’ is found on a ‘pinnacle,’ we speak of the ‘peak’ of achievement, and we often think of progress in ascension terms as ‘climbing the ladder,’ or ‘making our way to the top.’ The old boy is reminding us here that these perceptions, while perhaps useful and valid in the context of careers and employment; really need to be re-evaluated. The old boy is essentially warning us here that these concepts may be facile and misleading in the context of advancement along the way of the Dao as great journey. These entrenched notions with their not-so-subtle spatial indicators may sometimes even represent obstacles upon the way.

In short; the semantic baggage of materialism can be a positive hindrance when applied to the amorphous concept of the unity in the Dao

The Dao is the spirit of the valley, and the valley is the friendly place where life is encouraged. The valley is also the middle ground, and the natural source of comfort and nurture; the high peaks however, are generally bleak and hostile places, cold, threatening, and lacking in creature comforts. As the old boy would have it; we do not need to ascend any steep path to reach any supposed zenith of enlightenment; could simply allow ourselves to fall into it…

67.

It is known by all that the unity in the whole is vast and ill defined,

Resembling nothing, it can be overlooked or ignored,

But if you were to fix its limits — what then would be limitless?

I have three treasures to hold, to honour and to lend strength:

The first of these is the strength of caring and compassion,

The second is the conserving strength of frugality,

The third is the yielding strength of humility,

Courage is born of the strength in compassion,

Generosity is born of the strength in frugality,

Leadership is born of the strength in humility.

Therefore, never forsake mercy for bravery,

Never forsake economy for embellishment,

And never forsake the people for the state,

That is the way of destruction.

With compassion comes triumph in assault and security in defence,

This is heavenly protection.

The three great strengths of compassion, frugality and humility are the (apparently) simple pre-requisites for an approach towards the essence that is the Dao. Compassion is the caring and nurturing realisation of one’s place in the world, and the obligation of every individual on the way to take on the responsibility of doing ‘the right thing’ in every contingency. No exceptions are permitted, no compromise of principles countenanced, wherever this characteristic is lacking, there is yet work on the self to be done.

‘Frugality’ here does not imply that material possessions are always bad; but it *does* imply a lack of desire for riches. The old boy might tell you that is the *desire* for riches, and not the riches themselves, which block progress on the way; and that true frugality is the urge towards conservation and the wise use of resources rather than any special glorification of the ascetic life.

Humility we have discussed already, and here we are reminded by the old boy that this attribute is *absolutely fundamental* to proper leadership and good government. Once the ‘people are forsaken’ for the benefit of the ‘state,’ a great injustice has occurred. This advice is given to society's leaders and guiding bodies by the old boy with eyes glinting and bushy white beard twitching, and in the full knowledge that this precept is rarely heeded by career politicians; *this* degree of harmony with the greater good is found in only the very best of statesmen and women.

The implication here; that states are generally *not* noted for their wisdom, point towards a conclusion the old boy sorrowfully supports; Governments are remarkable both for their ‘cleverness’ in the Daoist sense, and for their lack of any real wisdom at all (certainly in the way the old boy would define it). The reasons for this failure are quite clear; a foreseeable consequence of individuals neglecting their duty in taking proper responsibility for the actions of the institution. The old boy would say that; wherever responsibility is diluted among groups, or is foisted onto nebulous legal entities, which are in fact, nothing but pieces of paper; then the capacity for horrors and atrocities is created.

The old boy might also add that the state should no more sacrifice its citizens in self-aggrandisement, than parents should sacrifice their children to better their own positions… and that if more of their constituent members were to undertake proper work upon themselves; then this impasse would not be reached.

68.

The best of all soldiers is never violent,

The best of all fighters is never angry,

The greatest victors take no revenge,

The greatest leaders are modest and unassuming.

This is the virtue of non-contention,

Advancement through harmony with nature and the efforts of others.

In this way, the ultimate unity is approached.

69.

Strategists say:

Never be complacent about your advantages,

And know that the best advance may lie in retreat.

Not all forward progress requires movement,

And when rolling up the sleeves — the arm need not be shown.

Do not seek adversaries where there are none,

Being armed and ready is not about taking up weapons.

Do not go to war lightly — or underestimate the cost.

In advocating hasty confrontation — you risk the unity in the whole.

So, when battle is joined, know this —

Wars are won by those bringing most regret and sorrow to the conflict.

70.

My words are easy to understand, and simple in application,

Yet — the world neither understands nor applies them.

Even simple words may acquire intricate meaning over time,

And their application is for nothing if self-indulgence hides the goal.

Without proper understanding — the words have no power,

Those people with true understanding are few,

Those who emulate them gain honour,

The poorest of homespun clothing can conceal a precious treasure.

71.

To know that you may not know — is a strength,

Not knowing, yet believing that you know — is a weakness.

Difficulties are avoided by remaining aware of all possibilities,

The wise are aware and meet with no difficulty.



Awareness: this is what constitutes preparedness; and the old boy warns leaders of state everywhere that the formation of mighty armies and the creation of stockpiles of ever more powerful, ever more deadly weapons, are less an indicator of overall wise preparedness; and more a clear signal of a pervasive sense of vulnerability and fear…

At the individual level, the old boy is here advocating an easy attentiveness and a harmonious acceptance of the environmental reality, rather than the adoption of a defensive posture which *might* indicate belligerent intention, and *will*, at very least, raise suspicions of some level of unnecessary paranoia. The old boy might also advise that the willing anticipation of conflict where no adversary exists; substantially increases the likelihood that an adversary will eventually appear...

It is a fact nonetheless, that this wary tension and consequent expectation of hostility are prevalent enough to be considered as not that far from the norm in our mistrustful modern world. This raises the question: what *causes* our anger, our fear, and a widespread, fundamental distrust of others which is so compelling that we are prepared to expend a significant portion of our time, energy and resources on self-protection? And all this (generally) to protect ourselves against an enemy we have either imagined, or conjured from nothing by our own belligerent posturing..

CG Jung had some ideas on this topic when he observed **cite** that historically, wars are fought between close neighbours; though the definition of 'neighbour' is often stretched in modern times when we are considering the intersecting spheres of influence of global powers, this is also true today: our neighbours are our natural enemies... Traditionally, when we are in times of trouble, when we find ourselves inadequate to some task, when we have a need to exorcise the source of our inner doubts, uncertainties and inadequacies, when we are looking for a scapegoat, and when someone *really* *needs* to be blamed (but hearth and home are to remain untainted); the neighbours are there to fill the void and give representative substance to all that is negative in our lives.

In terms of the needs of state leadership, the neighbours are a godsend; leaders can, and do, take the focus away from their own dismal performances and stifle the mutterings of discontent within their constituencies by creating common cause against the neighbours. Many an embattled government official has escaped censure by pointing triumphantly towards the supposedly inimical plots of the nearest neighbours and exhorting the people to stand united with them to face this threat. When *real* harmony has failed, when the way has been lost to vision; then the unscrupulous, or plain uncomprehending leader may yet attain the illusion of unity and harmony by invoking the threat of the neighbours...

Xenophobia, bigotry, prejudice... these are all the tools of a leadership of poorly-performing officials who have need to divert attention from their own failures of leadership and their own lack of vision. The usual tactic is to invoke some massive external threat and spread fear and uncertainty throughout the population. If this tactic is then combined with tight control of information, and lots of nationalistic propaganda, the call to patriotic duty, (particularly to the lesser educated populace) quickly becomes almost irresistible.

The inferior leadership, sensing a ground-swell of support, can now ease their own fears of overthrow and divert attention from their incompetence by quickly acting to curtail civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association; all of which is done in the interests of 'the security of the state.' Then, as the leadership becomes more securely entrenched, and since its members are all self-serving individuals with a penchant for exercising control at every level, opportunities will arise for personal enrichment and the real corruption sets in…

This cycle represents a familiar historical pattern; and the old boy was fully aware of how this sequence can seize communities, even whole nations, and trigger the movements of mighty armies. At a single stroke, by invoking the threat of the neighbours, a powerful popular movement is created; one which apparently offers unity and the prospect of fulfilment against a common enemy; *because* it mimics the harmony of the genuine journey towards the Dao...

As this impending disaster gathers the force and momentum to shatter lives and potentially, impoverish whole cultures and entire generations of people, the ambitions of the inferior leadership continue to be furthered. Their cravings for more power are nurtured by the prospect of conquest and meanwhile; ever more severe 'emergency measures are introduced as the nation moves to 'war footing'...

The old boy would keep both his silence and his distance from the fray; but mourn that the way had, for now, been lost...

72.

When the people no longer sense awe and wonder — disaster looms.

Knowing this, the wise leader is unobtrusive,

The people are as they choose at home and at work,

And they never tire of their leader.

The wise leader is knowing, but not ostentatious,

And has a respect for self that is never arrogant,

The wise know when to choose and what to let go.

73.

To have courage and boldness may bring early death,

To have courage and caution may preserve a life.

There is good here and there is harm — yet who can unravel this?

Some things are rewarded by heaven — while some are punished.

So, even the wisest must accept that chance may bring adversity.

The way of fulfilment in unity is overcoming without contention.

In responding without words,

In receiving without asking,

In being ordered — and yet being at rest.

Heaven's net is the coarsest of mesh,

Yet nothing escapes it.

74.

When the people are not afraid to die,

Threats of death are of little use.

Only when the people are afraid to die,

Can any control be exercised.

Every state has some personage with the power of life and death,

But when this executioner's power is delegated to others,

As when the tradesman allows the novice the use of sharp tools,

Few escape without hurting their own hands.

75.

Why are the people hungry?

Governments eat up more and more in taxes.

While the ordinary people are starving.

Why are the people rebelling?

Governments interfere too much,

And the ordinary people revolt.

Why do the people treat death so lightly?

Governments make life a misery and a torment,

And the ordinary people have little to live for.

But, in ceasing to value life, one may yet discover a wisdom,

That those who value their lives have not yet found.

76.

A living body is soft and compliant,

While the dead are firm and unyielding.

Live plant growth is delicate, sap filled and pliable,

But in death — dry, shrivelled and brittle.

Unyielding rigidity is the hallmark of death,

Gentle compliance the key to good life.

So, force used without flexibility achieves little,

And, what cannot bend under pressure — may break.

The great cycle of life fits the stronger for the lowest position,

While the submissive and compliant conquers all.

There comes a time in *any* life of oppression when the choice between living and dying is not so clear cut; the individual feels there is now nothing left to lose, one may face extinction and die quietly and with resignation, or one may perhaps strike a final defiant blow in the name of freedom. At the state level, if this impasse has been reached, the leadership have only themselves to blame, they have long since ceased to follow the old boy’s advice on how a leader should behave.

At this point, the state has becoming a parasitical community of the elite; they are living the high life, embracing corruption and the opportunities for self-enrichment, while their lifestyles are subsidised by a dispossessed and disenfranchised majority struggling for day to day survival…

At the personal and individual level, the old boy is talking here about those who have strayed from the path towards the greater good and lost themselves in some lesser pursuit. The result is not always that some calamitous occurrence points the individual towards living a misguided and ultimately destructive life; sometimes the vision of the Dao is simply lost and life is bleak and meaningless in its lack of purpose. A person could choose to be resigned to the end of life here, or, could heed the old boy’s advice in the lines above; take responsibility! You have one life only, and yet you are prepared to sit passively, in effect delegating the use of the executioner’s axe to an external force that might just use it on you…

The old boy will also remind you of the enantiodromia implicit in the amorphous Dao; were you already advised that it is at that darkest time of night that the universal ebb and flow swings towards the dawning of the light...?

77.

The way to greater good is as the tuning of a fine instrument,

What is too high is lowered, what is too low is raised,

Excess is removed, deficiencies augmented and corrected.

Until a final perfect balance is achieved.

The way of harmony is to take from excess and give to insufficiency,

The ways of most states is different.

Governments will take from those with need,

And give to those with plenty.

Who is it that can curb this excess and tend to the poor?

One who has achieved the harmony of the whole.

The best work is done by those with no thought of recognition,

Success is attained more easily by those who do not prize it,

The very highest good arrives quietly and without fanfare.

78.

Nothing under heaven is softer, more amenable, than water.

And yet nothing surpasses its power,

It cuts through strength and solidity and all that will not yield,

In this same way — the weak overcome the strong,

In this same way — the submissive defeats the uncompromising,

This is knowledge readily acquired — although almost never practiced.

Heed these wise words:

One who takes on the humiliation of a people is a fit ruler,

One who takes on the tragedy of the nation — is a great ruler.

The most straightforward of truths can seem paradoxical.

79.

When past enemies make their peace — resentments linger on.

What is there to do?

The wise keep to their side of the bargain,

And expect nothing of the other half.

The well-meaning keep to their side of the bargain,

And try not to concern themselves with the other half.

The unwise keep to their side of the bargain,

But, then insist the other half discharge their responsibilities.

But the way of heaven has no favourites —

It is forever on the side of the good.

80.

A state should not be burdened with too high a population,

Or, too heavy a bureaucracy.

The people should be prepared to fight for what is right,

But reluctant to enter into unnecessary conflict.

The people should be capable of travelling far when needs arise,

But happy enough to stay where they are.

The people should prize living enough to take death seriously.

The weapons of war are best hidden and unused,

A nation's armour should be secured in its repository.

While the people find pleasure in the simple, ordinary things:

The goodness of plain home-cooking all can enjoy,

Good, homespun clothing, unadorned by fine brocade,

The security and comforts of home,

The company of family and the fellowship of friends.

And though they see and hear their next-door-neighbour,

And though their neighbour's dogs bark and their cock's crow,

They live in peace together to the end of their days.

81.

Truthful words are not always beautiful,

As beautiful words are not always true.

Persuasive words are not always wise,

As wise words are not always persuasive.

The greatest wisdom is often not heard from the most learned teachers,

But may come from those who say they do not know.

The wise hoard nothing to themselves,

But, in their unfailing generosity — never lack things to give.

Then having given all — they live in abundance.

The way of the greatest good is to benefit all in striving for wholeness.

In harmony,

In refusal of contention —

And in bountiful generosity —

Is the way of unity and completion.



Every single day throughout the world huge numbers of people observe the rites and conform to the behaviours that their belief in their gods prescribes. Almost since humanity took its first faltering bipedal steps on the dusty African plains, some form of religious, spiritual observance has been a core feature of the development of culture and civilisation everywhere. Individuals can express their spiritual nature in a myriad of ways; through organised religion, through mysticism or occult practice, through commitment to some vital cause, through dedication to meditation or by pursuing some other life-goal.

Although we are each individually free to choose to renounce the reality of any, or of all, of our personified divinities, the transcendental aspiration is something that always remains. If this mysterious impulse is ignored or denied, we simply fail to reach our potential as human beings.

The Dao is a concept elemental to all spiritual enterprise and to all humanity. In this sense, the idea of God in all things and all things in God sits as comfortably with Lao Zi as it does with any number of religious orders and certainly with all of those in the Mosaic tradition. As we have previously discussed; perceptions of the ‘real’ nature of that ‘God’ may vary from an inner transcendent aspect of the self, to some external deity perched on an unlikely golden throne. And if the idea of the deity itself is renounced, and the existence of God denied, the old boy is unperturbed; and the *Dao de Jing* remains what it always was; a practical treatise on unity, harmony and personal integrity.

When all else fails, and the storm anchors of external belief will not hold, when adherence to ritual and form is not enough; then *The Dao De Jing* is a collection of ideas wholly relevant to any personal; or community quest for the best possible life.

And if the inner vision is to be pursued through some idealistic, social or political form of commitment; to the old man it matters little providing the acceptance and commitment are real and honest; this is still a first step along the way. As Jung put it:

One should not be deterred by the rather silly objection that nobody really knows whether these old universal ideas — God, immortality, freedom of the will, and so on — are ‘true’ or not. Truth is the wrong criterion here. One can only ask whether they are helpful or not, whether man is better off and feels his life more complete, more meaningful and more satisfactory with or without them[[42]](#footnote-42).

Psychologically, existentially, personally, philosophically; the transcendent impulse towards the formless unknown of our own latent possibility within the essence of the Dao is a phenomenon as much a part of ourselves as is our physical body. Ultimately, the search for meaning, the Dao as great journey; the Way, is not about applying a method, just as it is also not about adopting a truth. It is about acquiring an attitude, a positive and harmonious orientation to reality. The differences here are critically important. The Way is the uncompromising expression of an individual nature; whereas, a method is only ever a pretension. The Way is founded in a deep and sincere appreciation of a set of fundamental truths; and the application of the simple values those truths reveal; by contrast, even the best of methods is just imitation.

There is some small but significant danger in a personal commitment to the principles of the Dao by someone with western cultural values; in that a balance must be maintained. The acceptance of the irrational cannot be accompanied by any rash rejection of previously accepted truth in science and empirical knowledge in general. Although this abandonment may seem at first to be a form of liberation in freeing the mind for the inward focus implied by the greater task; this is a delusion, the Dao is *the all* and nothing less. The old boy might remind you that the ideal here is the integration of opposing viewpoints; and most definitely not the exchange of one set of polarised viewpoints for another.

The old boy’s final words in the final verse, relate to the commitment of self that the Dao as great journey implies; how difficult and strenuous is it really? How much exertion is required?

The old boy would gaze at you sardonically, white beard bristling…

‘You have to give it all’, he might answer, ‘Every fibre of your being. But perhaps before you start wondering if this is a high price to pay; think about *who* you are giving this abundance to!’

☯

Jack Parkinson: Suzhou, China – June, 2014

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