



## Part I: Tao – The Way

The character for Tao can be literally translated as “path.” In the context of Lao Tzu, it usually is translated as “Way,” with connotations of Nature or the Absolute—a field far beyond form and emptiness in which the life and death of all beings takes place. Tao is both the river in which we are swimming and our own currents, which we contribute to this stream. It is so intrinsic to our every moment that, like fish in water, we may fail to see it.

# 1

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way;  
the name that can be named is not the Immortal Name.  
Nameless the Source of earth and sky,  
names engender every thing.  
Unfettered by desire, the mystery reveals itself;  
wanting *this* gives rise to *that*.  
Beyond named and nameless, reality still flows;  
unfathomable the arch, the door, the gate.**

YOUR NAME IS A SUMMONS, not a self. Whatever names have been bestowed on you, whatever names you have created for yourself, are only pointers, motes of dust that enable our thoughts to condense and identify an object. But you are not an object; you are a way seeking itself. Names can give the illusion of some unchanging essence “underneath” the name, so don’t be deceived; the real you does not stop nor start but swirls and streams.

You are always yourself, moment to moment, in nonstop flow. Your way is not a *becoming* but a *being*, not a matter of now and then, but always: you are the time of your life.

You are not what others think of you; you are not even who you think you are. Thoughts label but do not live. You cannot be summarized in a song, much less captured in a name.

You are not what people call you. Racial slurs and noble honorifics,

whether they slander or celebrate you, are mere labels on a garment of identity that is less than skin deep.

Sometimes, angry with yourself, you call yourself names. Sometimes, proud of yourself, you style yourself with sobriquets. You need not deny any part of you, but no single part can stand in for your whole self. You are greater than the sum of your parts, vast in your unique whole-someness.

Feel free to amuse yourself with appellations, but don't feel entitled to your titles or hemmed in by your handles. Affixing labels is just a game of tag. Are you It?



After I earned my Ph.D. I worked in clinics as a psychotherapist and neuropsychologist. My clients called me “Doctor,” but my internist colleagues were not so certain. I was “Sir” to people wanting to sell me something; “Honey” to my wife, “Dad” to my children, “Bob” to my friends. Taking Buddhist vows, I was given the name Meikyo Onzen (“Clear Mirror Calm Sitting”). Some of my qigong students call me “Teacher.”

My daughter attended a ceremony affirming me as a senior student at Berkeley Zen Center. Now, when she sometimes wants advice to fend off, she begins her phone call with an affectionate teasing address: “Oh wise one . . .”

When you call yourself to your Self, do you address yourself that way?

Oh wise one, Dear Reader . . .

Calligraphy by Shodo Harada



## Part II: Te – Rightness

Te is sometimes translated as “virtue,” sometimes as “power,” but it transcends dualistic judgments of right/wrong, good/bad. Te is how the Way is expressed through a rightness that emerges to accord with circumstances naturally, “just so.”

**Governing a great state  
is like cooking a small fish.  
Governing the world with the Way,  
hungry ghosts lose their power.  
Not that they don't have power:  
it's just that their power no longer does harm.  
Sages harm neither ghosts nor people.  
Not harming each other,  
Rightness flows between, within both.**

OUR FEELINGS are no great states; really they're small fish. They like to convince us they're considerably bigger than they are.

It's difficult to cook a small fish. Leave it on the fire too long and its fillet turns dry; undercook and it is neither sushi nor savory. Similar cautions apply to our feelings. We undercook them when we ignore them; we overcook them when we stoke their fires. If we are anxious, we feel we should be scared; if we are angry, we tell ourselves we deserve respect!

Many of our feeling states are hungry ghosts: residues of undigested yearnings, phantoms of unrequited desires, rejected facets of ourselves. Traumatic experiences can haunt us for generations: your mother may have carried some of her mother's scars and passed them on to you through fits of temper or depression, during which she was unable to

respond to your needs. Such past lives may float through your body, mind, and spirit, intermingling with unresolved episodes from your own past.

If you try to reject and suppress these ghosts they are likely to hammer at your door at the most inopportune moment. If you spend too much of your time entertaining the wraiths, you can become a pale imitation of them, cut off from the vitality of current experience. The middle way suggests an alternative: when hungry ghosts come to visit, be a polite and gracious host but do not feed them. The ghosts, being hungry, will depart if they don't find food.

Governing small emotional states can become easier if we treat them as if they were ghosts with their own quirky personality traits. This method is frequently used in narrative psychotherapies. For example, most depressions can be characterized by the following:

- ▶ *Depression is a bully.* It is weaker than it appears; its balloon of power can be punctured and defeated by compassion.
- ▶ *Depression is a braggart.* It pretends to be self-abasing, but is really all about “me”—convincing the world I'm the very WORST person. Simple modesty and acknowledgment of being only human deflate depression's pride.
- ▶ *Depression is short-sighted.* It sees only isolated details. It needs corrective lenses to see the whole picture.
- ▶ *Depression is a liar.* It distorts reality to fit its biased picture of the world. It tries to discount discrepant facts but is confounded by matter-of-fact, realistic evidence.
- ▶ *Depression is humorless.* It can't stand a joke at its expense.
- ▶ *Depression is photophobic.* It shrivels in sunlight and fresh air.

All feelings—pleasant and unpleasant—have a character based in the dings and scrapes, the hopes and fears, of our egos. They pretend to be permanent. In the midst of an emotion, we feel this is how things were, are, and will be, that this is the real state of being and nothing else exists. We can only see as far as our feeling can reach.

In truth, all feelings come and go. Hoping a good feeling will last forever is a setup for disappointment; fearing a bad feeling will last forever is a prescription for despair. Which of your many feeling states is your “true” state of being? The only possible answer is “all and none.”

When you are friends with all your feelings—neither ruling nor ruled by them—you are connected to all sentient beings. Knowing your emotions share impermanence with all being, they lose their power to lead you around and harm you. Let them be. Like you, they can find peace in just being themselves; small fish swimming freely in an ocean that easily contains them all.

To quote Chuang Tzu:

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence—music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from.

Let it be! Let it be! It is enough that morning and evening we have them, and they are the means by which we live.



Early in our marriage my wife and I had difficulties dealing with the ghosts of angers past. Her parents had been repressed and never argued; my parents had daily screaming matches. My wife had troubles expressing anger; I yelled too much. We got help from a couples’ therapist who one day advised my wife: “Next time Bob gets angry and yells, just tell yourself that Bob is having a snit.”

I took offense and angrily objected (in other words, I threw a snit). “*Snit?*” I protested. “Snit! That’s disrespectful, to belittle my anger like that!”

The therapist smiled slightly. “Well, what would you prefer I call it? A temper tantrum?”

From then on, despite myself, whenever I started to get angry I heard the word “snit” in my mind. It made it hard to use my temper to puff myself up.

At first I was annoyed about not getting annoyed, but soon the silliness of that became apparent. I began to smile whenever I started to get snit-mad. Pretty soon it was difficult to get angry without getting amused, and getting amused was such a soothing anodyne, I stopped getting angry.

I still get mad sometimes, but I usually find it isn't worth the energy. I prefer instead to just enjoy the people I wrestle with—including that most impossible and irritating person: me.