

Tao Te Ching (Ch. 52-55) Translated by James Legge

52.

1. (The Tâo) which originated all under the sky is to be considered as the mother of them all.
2. When the mother is found, we know what her children should be. When one knows that he is his mother's child, and proceeds to guard (the qualities of) the mother that belong to him, to the end of his life he will be free from all peril.
3. Let him keep his mouth closed, and shut up the portals (of his nostrils), and all his life he will be exempt from laborious exertion. Let him keep his mouth open, and (spend his breath) in the promotion of his affairs, and all his life there will be no safety for him.
4. The perception of what is small is (the secret of) clear-sightedness; the guarding of what is soft and tender is (the secret of) strength.
5. Who uses well his light,
Reverting to its (source so) bright,
Will from his body ward all blight,
And hides the unchanging from men's sight.

歸元, 'Returning to the Source.' The meaning of the chapter is obscure, and the commentators give little help in determining it. As in the preceding chapter, Lâo-dze treats of the operation of the Tâo on material things, he seems in this to go on to the operation of it in man, or how he, with his higher nature, should ever be maintaining it in himself.

For the understanding of paragraph 1 we must refer to the first chapter of the treatise, where the Tâo, 'having no name,' appears as 'the Beginning' or 'First Cause' of the world, and then, 'having a name,' as its 'Mother.' It is the same thing or concept in both of its phases, the ideal or absolute, and the manifestation of it in its passionless doings. The old Jesuit translators render this par. by 'Mundus principium et causam suam habet in Divino 有, seu actione Divinae sapientiae quae dici potest ejus mater.' So far I may assume that they agreed with me in understanding that the subject of the par. was the Tâo.

Par. 2 lays down the law of life for man thus derived from the Tâo. The last clause of it is given by the same translators as equivalent to 'Unde fit ut post mortem nihil ei timendum sit,'--a meaning which the characters will not bear. But from that clause, and the next par., I am obliged to conclude that even in Lâo-dze's mind there was the germ of the sublimation of the material frame which issued in the asceticism and life-preserving arts of the later Tâoism.

Par. 3 seems to indicate the method of 'guarding the mother in man,' by watching over the breath, the proto-plastic 'one' of ch. 42, the ethereal matter out of which all material things were formed. The organs of this breath in man are the mouth and nostrils (nothing else should be understood here by **兌** and **門**,--see the explanations of the former in the last par. of the fifth of the appendixes to the Yî in vol. xvi, p. 432); and the management of the breath is the mystery of the esoteric Buddhism and Tâoism.

In par. 4 'The guarding what is soft' is derived from the use of 'the soft lips' in hiding and preserving the hard and strong teeth.

Par. 5 gives the gist of the chapter:--Man's always keeping before him the ideal of the Tâo, and, without purpose, simply doing whatever he finds to do; Tâo-like and powerful in all his sphere of action.

I have followed the reading of the last character but one, which is given by Ziâo Hung instead of

that found in Ho-shang Kung and Wang Pî.

53.

1. If I were suddenly to become known, and (put into a position to) conduct (a government) according to the Great Tâo, what I should be most afraid of would be a boastful display.
2. The great Tâo (or way) is very level and easy; but people love the by-ways.
3. Their court(-yards and buildings) shall be well kept, but their fields shall be ill-cultivated, and their granaries very empty. They shall wear elegant and ornamented robes, carry a sharp sword at their girdle, pamper themselves in eating and drinking, and have a superabundance of property and wealth;--such (princes) may be called robbers and boasters. This is contrary to the Tâo surely!

益證, 'Increase of Evidence.' The chapter contrasts government by the Tâo with that conducted in a spirit of ostentation and by oppression.

In the 'I' of paragraph 1 does Lâu-dze speak of himself? I think he does. Wû Khäng understands it of 'any man,' i. e. any one in the exercise of government;--which is possible. What is peculiar to my version is the pregnant meaning given to **有知**, common enough in the mouth of Confucius. I have adopted it here because of a passage in Liû Hsiang's Shwo-wän (XX, 13 b), where Lâu-dze is made to say 'Excessive is the difficulty of practising the Tâo at the present time,' adding that the princes of his age would not receive it from him. On the 'Great Tâo,' see chapters 25, 34, et al. From the twentieth book of Han Fei (12 b and 13 a) I conclude that he had the whole of this chapter in his copy of our King, but he broke it up, after his fashion, into fragmentary utterances, confused and confounding. He gives also some remarkable various readings, one of which (**筭**, instead of Ho-shang Kung and Wang Pî's **夸**, character 48) is now generally adopted. The passage is quoted in the Khang-hsî dictionary under **筭** with this reading.

54.

1. What (Tâo's) skilful planter plants
Can never be uptorn;
What his skilful arms enfold,
From him can ne'er be borne.
Sons shall bring in lengthening line,
Sacrifices to his shrine.
2. Tâo when nursed within one's self,
His vigour will make true;
And where the family it rules
What riches will accrue!
The neighbourhood where it prevails
In thriving will abound;
And when 'tis seen throughout the state,
Good fortune will be found.
Employ it the kingdom o'er,
And men thrive all around.
3. In this way the effect will be seen in the person, by the observation of different cases; in the family; in the neighbourhood; in the state; and in the kingdom.
4. How do I know that this effect is sure to hold thus all under the sky? By this (method of

observation).

修觀, "The Cultivation (of the Tâo), and the Observation (of its Effects)." The sentiment of the first paragraph is found in the twenty-seventh and other previous chapters,--that the noiseless and imperceptible acting of the Tâo is irresistible in its influence; and this runs through to the end of the chapter with the additional appeal to the influence of its effects. The introduction of the subject of sacrifices, a religious rite, though not presented to the Highest Object, will strike the reader as peculiar in our King.

The Teh mentioned five times in par. 2 is the 'virtue' of the Tâo embodied in the individual, and extending from him in all the spheres of his occupation, and is explained differently by Han Fei according to its application; and his example I have to some extent followed.

The force of pars. 3 and 4 is well given by Ho-shang Kung. On the first clause he says, 'Take the person of one who cultivates the Tâo, and compare it with that of one who does not cultivate it;--which is in a state of decay? and which is in a state of preservation?'

55.

1. He who has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Tâo) is like an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him; fierce beasts will not seize him; birds of prey will not strike him.
2. (The infant's) bones are weak and its sinews soft, but yet its grasp is firm. It knows not yet the union of male and female, and yet its virile member may be excited;--showing the perfection of its physical essence. All day long it will cry without its throat becoming hoarse;--showing the harmony (in its constitution).
3. To him by whom this harmony is known,
(The secret of) the unchanging (Tâo) is shown,
And in the knowledge wisdom finds its throne.
All life-increasing arts to evil turn;
Where the mind makes the vital breath to burn,
(False) is the strength, (and o'er it we should mourn.)
4. When things have become strong, they (then) become old, which may be said to be contrary to the Tâo. Whatever is contrary to the Tâo soon ends.

玄符, 'The Mysterious Charm;' meaning, apparently, the entire passivity of the Tâo.

With pars. 1 and 2, compare what is said about the infant in chapters 10 and 20, and about the immunity from dangers such as here described of the disciple of the Tâo in ch. 50. My 'evil' in the second triplet of par. 3 has been translated by 'felicity;' but a reference to the Khang-hsî dictionary will show that the meaning which I give to 祥 is well authorised. It is the only meaning allowable here. The third and fourth 曰 in this par. appear in Ho-shang Kung's text as 日, and he comments on the clauses accordingly; but 曰 is now the received reading. Some light is thrown on this paragraph and the next by an apocryphal conversation attributed to Lâu-dze in Liú Hsiang's Shwo-wän, X, 4 a.

The Tao Te Ching (Ch. 52 – 55) Translated by Robert G. Henricks

52

1. The world had a beginning,
2. Which can be considered the mother of the world.
3. Having attained the mother, in order to understand her children.
4. If you return and hold on to the mother, till the end of your life you'll suffer no harm.
5. Block up the holes;
6. Close the doors;
7. And till the end of your life you'll not labor.
8. Open the holes;
9. Meddle in affairs;
10. And till the end of your life you'll not be saved.
11. To receive the small is called "discernment."
12. To hold on to the pliant is called "strength."
13. If you use the rays to return to the bright light,
14. You'll not abandon your life to peril.
15. This is called Following the Constant.

53

1. Were I to have the least bit of knowledge, in walking on a Great Rod, it's only going astray that I would fear.
2. The Great Way is very level;
3. But people greatly delight in tortuous paths.
4. The courts are swept very clean;
5. While the fields are full of weeds;
6. And the granaries are all empty.
7. Their clothing—richly embroidered and colored;
8. While at their waists they carry sharp swords.
9. They gorge themselves on food, and of possessions and goods they have plenty.
10. This is called thievery!
11. And thievery certainly isn't the Way!

54

1. What is firmly set up can't be pulled down;
2. What is firmly embraced cannot slip free.
3. And your sons and grandsons, as a result, will sacrifice without end.
4. When you cultivate it in your person, your virtue will then be genuine;
5. When you cultivate it in your family, your virtue will then be overflow;
6. When you cultivate it in your village, your virtue will then be long lasting;
7. When you cultivate it in your state, your virtue will then be abundant;

8. And when you cultivate it throughout the world, your virtue will then be widespread.
9. Use the individual to examine the individual;
10. Use the family to examine the family;
- [10a Use the village to examine the village;]
11. Use the state to examine the state;
12. And use the world to examine the world;
13. How do I know that the world is so?
14. By this.

55

1. One who embraces the fullness of Virtue,
2. Can be compared to a newborn babe.
3. Wasps and scorpions, snakes and vipers do not sting him;
4. Birds of prey and fierce beasts do not seize him;
5. His bones and muscles are weak and pliant, yet his grasp is firm;
6. He does not yet know the meeting of male and female, yet his organ is aroused—
7. This is because his essence is at its height.
8. He can scream all day, yet he won't become hoarse—
9. This is because his harmony is at its height.
10. To know harmony is called "the constant";
11. To know the constant is called "being wise";
12. To add on to life is called a "bad omen";
13. For the mind to control the breath—that's called "forcing things."
14. When things reach their prime they get old;
15. This is called "not the Way."
16. What is not the Way will come to an early end.