

Tao Te Ching: Verse One

A Collection of Translations

This is a blog of translations of the first verse of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching by the writers listed below:

Bart Marshall
Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English
Steven Mitchell
Stephen F. Kaufman
Ursula K. Le Guin
Witter Bynner
Frank J. MacHovec
Raymond B. Blakney
Raghavan Iyer
Jonathan Star
John C. H. Wu
Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo
Dwight Goddard
Ellen M. Chen
Brian Browne Walker
R. L. Wing
John H. McDonald
Ralph Alan Dale
Victor H. Mair
David Hinton

Bart Marshall

That which can be perceived is not the timeless That.
That which can be named is not the nameless One.

The source of heaven and earth is without form or substance.
Naming creates the ten thousand things.

When desire is absent, Mystery is obvious.
When desire occurs, Creation unfolds.

Mystery and Creation arise from the same source.
The source is emptiness.
Void within Void.
The realm of Tao.

Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
 This appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

Steven Mitchell

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations

arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.

Stephen F. Kaufman

The true way is unknown and so is the untrue way
There are no names to understand it
Creation does not care that it is the source of creation
It emanates as some “thing”
And is not without nourishment
Mysteries are revealed
Become Its way
Attain Its perfection
Do not use words to describe its no-thing-ness

The three are the same but distinct
One is the Body
One is the Heart
One is the Mind
To understand it as one is the most you can do
It is the path to higher and lesser knowledge

Ursula K. Le Guin

Taoing

The way you can go
isn't the real way.
The name you can say
isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth
began in the unnamed:
name's the mother
of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanting soul
sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,
but different in name,
whose identity is mystery,
Mystery of all mysteries!
The door to the hidden.

Witter Bynner

Existence is beyond the power of words
To define:
Terms may be used
But are none of them absolute.
In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words,
Words came out of the womb of matter;
And whether a man dispassionately
Sees to the core of life
Or passionately
Sees the surface,
The core and the surface
Are essentially the same,
Words making them seem different
Only to express appearance.
If name be needed, wonder names them both:
From wonder into wonder
Existence opens.

Frank J. MacHovec

The Tao described in words is not the real Tao. Words cannot describe it. Nameless it is the source of creation; named it is the mother of all things.

To see Tao the observer must be motiveless. Those with selfish motives see only the surface, not the innermost depths. These two kinds of observers look alike but differ in the insight of their observations.

They look alike because they are both human; within humanity is the key to the door of creation.

Raymond B. Blakney

There are ways but the Way is uncharted;
There are names but not nature in words:
Nameless indeed is the source of creation

But things have a mother and she has a name.

The secret waits for the insight
Of eyes unclouded by longing;
Those who are bound by desire
See only the outward container.

These two come paired but distinct
By their names.
Of all things profound,
Say that their pairing is deepest,
The gate to the root of the world

Raghavan Iyer

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
The Nameless is the Source of Heaven and Earth;
The named is the Mother of Ten Thousand Things.
Desireless, one may behold the mystery;
Desiring, one may see the manifestations.
Though one in origin,
They emerge with distinct names.
Both are mysteries –
Depth within depth –
The threshold of all secrets.

Jonathan Star

A way that can be walked
is not The Way
A name that can be named
is not The Name

Tao is both Named and Nameless
As Nameless, it is the origin of all things
As Named, it is the mother of all things

A mind free of thought,
merged within itself,
beholds the essence of Tao
A mind filled with thought,
identified with its own perceptions,
beholds the mere forms of this world

Tao and this world seem different
but in truth they are one and the same
The only difference is in what we call them

How deep and mysterious is this unity
How profound, how great!
It is the truth beyond the truth,
the hidden within the hidden
It is the path to all wonder,
the gate to the essence of everything!

John C. H. Wu

Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao.
Names can be named, but not the Eternal Name.

As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless:
As “the Mother” of all things, it is namable.

So, as ever hidden, we should look at its inner essence:
As always manifest, we should look at its outer aspects.

These two flow from the same source, though differently named:
And both are called mysteries.

The Mystery of mysteries is the Door of all essence.

Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo

Tao called Tao is not Tao.

Names can name no lasting name.

Nameless: the origins of heaven and earth.
Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

Empty of desire; perceive mystery.
Filled with desire, perceive manifestations.

These have the same source, but different names.
Call them both deep –
Deep and again deep:

The gateway to all mystery.

Dwight Goddard

What is the Tao?

The Tao that can be understood
is not the eternal, cosmic Tao,
just as an idea that can be expressed in words
is not the infinite idea.

And yet this ineffable Tao
is the source of all spirit and matter;
expressing itself,
it is the mother of all created things.

Not to desire material things
is to know the freedom of spirituality;
and to desire is to suffer
the limitations of matter.

These two things – spirit and matter –
so different in nature, have the same origin.
This unity of origin is the mystery of mysteries,
and the gateway to spirituality.

Ellen M. Chen

Tao that can be spoken of,
Is not the Everlasting Tao.
Name that can be named,
Is not the Everlasting name.

Nameless, the origin of heaven and earth;
Named, the mother of ten thousand things.
Alternate,
Non-being, to name the origin of heaven and earth;
Being, to name the mother of ten thousand things.

Therefore, always without desire,
In order to observe the hidden mystery;
Always with desire,
In order to observe the manifestations.
Alternate,

Therefore, by the Everlasting Non-Being,
We desire to observe its hidden mystery;
By the Everlasting Being,
We desire to observe the manifestations.

These two issue from the same origin,
Though named differently.
Both are called the dark.
Dark and even darker,
The door to all hidden mysteries.

Brian Browne Walker

Tao is beyond words
 and beyond understanding.
Words may be used to speak of it,
 but they cannot contain it.

Tao existed before words and names,
 before heaven and earth,
 before the ten thousand things.
It is the unlimited father and mother
 of all limited things.

Therefore, to see beyond boundaries
 to the subtle heart of things,
 dispense with names,
 with concepts,
 with expectations and ambitions and differences.

Tao and its many manifestations
 arise from the same source:
 subtle wonder within mysterious darkness.

This is the beginning of all understanding.

R. L. Wing

The Beginning of Power

The Tao that can be expressed
 Is not the Tao of the Absolute.
The name that can be named
 Is not the name of the Absolute.

The nameless originated Heaven and Earth.
The named is the Mother of All Things.

Thus, without expectation,
 One will always perceive subtlety;
And, with expectation,
 One will always perceive the boundary.

The source of these two is identical,
Yet their names are different.
Together they are called profound,
Profound and mysterious,
The gateway to the Collective Subtlety.

John H. McDonald

The tao that can be described
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be spoken
is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the boundary of Heaven
 and Earth.
The named is the mother of creation.
Freed from desire, you can see the hidden
 mystery.
By having desire, you can only see what is
 visibly real.

Yet mystery and reality
emerge from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness born from darkness.
The beginning of all understanding.

Ralph Alan Dale

The Tao that can be told
is not the universal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the universal name.

In the infancy of the universe,
there were no names.
Naming fragments the mysteries of life
into ten thousand things and their manifestations.

Yet mysteries and manifestations
spring from the same source:
The Great Integrity
which is the mystery within manifestation,
the manifestation within mystery,
the naming of the unnamed,
and the un-naming of the named.

When these interpretations
are in full attendance,
we will pass the gates of naming notions
in our journey toward transcendence.

Victor H. Mair

The ways that can be walked are not the eternal Way;
The names that can be named are not the eternal name.
The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;
The named is the mother of the myriad creature.

Therefore,
 Always be without desire
 in order to observe its wondrous subtleties;
 Always have desire
 so that you may observe its manifestations.

Both of these derive from the same source;
They have different names but the same designation.

Mystery of mysteries,
The gate of all wonders!

(Reordered as Verse 45 based on the Ma-wang-rui manuscripts discovered in 1973)

David Hinton

A Way called the Way isn't the perennial Way.
A name that names isn't the perennial name:

the named is the mother to the ten thousand things,
but the unnamed is origin to all heaven and earth.

In perennial Absence you see mystery,
and in perennial Presence you see appearance.
Though the two are one in the same,
once they arise, they differ in name.

One and the same, they're called *dark-enigma*,
dark-enigma deep within dark-enigma,

gateway of all mystery.