

The Wisdom of the Tao

The Wisdom of the Tao

Ancient Stories That
Delight, Inform, and Inspire

SELECTED AND EDITED BY

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The Wandering Taoist

Seven Bamboo Tablets of the Cloudy Satchel

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Contents

	Introduction	xi
1	Fishing for Something Big	1
2	The Superlative Horse	2
3	Between Small and Large	4
4	The Sage Has No Thought of Fame	5
5	Failing to Distinguish What's Real	6
6	Reason for Song	7
7	Covering Eyes with a Leaf	8
8	Plowing for a Dog	9
9	The Foolish Old Man	10
10	The Jingwei Bird Tries to Fill the Sea	12
11	In the Great Beginning	13
12	The Wind in the Hollows	14
13	The Right View	16
14	The Banquet	17
15	The Lost Horse	18
16	You'll Know in Time	19
17	How the World Began	20
18	The Duke Who Saw Yin and Yang	22
19	Nothing It Doesn't Do	23
20	How the World Arrives at Order	24
21	How the Universe Started	25
22	All Things and I Are One	26
23	There Is No Limit to Knowledge	27
24	The Wisdom of the Cook	28
25	The Realized Person	30

26	The Sage	32	54	Lamenting Dire Need	69
27	Look Up, Look Down	33	55	The Way of the Thief	70
28	Life Comes from the Birthless	34	56	Nonaction	72
29	The Master Carpenter	36	57	Seagulls	73
30	The Disabled Man	38	58	The Yellow Emperor Finds the Tao	74
31	The Usefulness of Being Useless	39	59	The Island of the Immortals	77
32	Covering One's Ears	40	60	The First Emperor	78
33	The Truthful Ministers	41	61	Death and Life	79
34	The Power of an Ugly Man	42	62	Peach Blossom Spring	80
35	What the Wise See	45	63	Rest	82
36	Forgetting Ugliness for Virtue	46	64	The Four Friends	83
37	The Philosophy of Hui Shi	48	65	The Four Stages of a Person's Life	86
38	Can People Be Without Desire?	50	66	How the Ancients Viewed Death	87
39	Roaming Free and Easy	51	67	Self-Possessed	88
40	White Dog, Black Dog	52	68	The Power of Complete Belief	89
41	The True Person	53	69	Concentrating Aims	93
42	The True Person of the Past	54	70	Taming Tigers	94
43	Serving Others	55	71	The Clever Daughter-In-Law	96
44	Breathing to the Heels	57	72	Do Not Oppress Hearts	99
45	The Disciples Outwit Their Master	58	73	Vulgar People	100
46	I Heard of Tao	59	74	The Death of Primal Chaos	101
47	Afraid of the World's Collapse	60	75	Finding the Right Spot	102
48	Hide the World in the World	62	76	The Speech of King Kang	103
49	I'm Improving	63	77	Dedicating Everyone to Love	104
50	Learning Takes Perseverance	64	78	Emperor Yao	106
51	Remembering What Made You	66	79	No Use Trying to Rule the World	108
52	The House of Peace	67	80	Those Who Possess Land	109
53	People Flourish in Tao	68	81	Making Use of a Fake Eunuch	110

82	Once There Is Pervasiveness	112	110	Do Not Assist Heaven	155
83	The Tao Spreads Over All	114	111	Following Heaven and Earth	156
84	The Brilliant Tao	116	112	Losing Proper Nature	157
85	The Teaching of the Great Person	118	113	Going Beyond Books	158
86	Seizing Opportunity	119	114	The Wheelwright	159
87	The Loyal Assassin	120	115	The Frog in the Well	160
88	Fire Mountain	123	116	Dragging My Tail in the Mud	161
89	The Wise Judge	124	117	The Phoenix and the Rat	162
90	Confucius and the Weeping Woman	125	118	The Enjoyment of Fishes	163
91	The Tao of Swimming	126	119	Happiness	164
92	King Mu and the Magician	128	120	What the World Honors	165
93	Mr. Yin's Illness	132	121	When Zhuangzi's Wife Died	166
94	The Gardener	134	122	When Heaven Initiates	167
95	The Water Pulley	135	123	Conversation with a Skull	168
96	Going to the Ocean	136	124	The Tumors	170
97	The Deer	138	125	The Drunk	171
98	Forgetfulness	140	126	Confucius and the Hunchback	172
99	The Men Who Switched Hearts	142	127	The Ferryman	173
100	A Jester's Wisdom	143	128	The Fighting Cocks	174
101	The Robot	144	129	The Woodcarver	175
102	The Right Use	146	130	How to Nurture a Bird	176
103	What Is Called Tao?	148	131	True Benevolence	177
104	Diversity and Unity	149	132	An Ugly Woman Imitates a Beauty	178
105	Three in the Morning	150	133	Only Seeing Gold	179
106	What Is Death, Really?	151	134	Suspicion	180
107	Penumbra and the Shadow	152	135	Clever Writing	181
108	The Butterfly Dream	153	136	Spear and Shield	182
109	Why Mourn?	154	137	On Usefulness and Uselessness	183

138		Waiting for a Hare to Appear	184
139		Knowledge and Nonaction	185
140		Talking at the Right Level	186
141		You Can't Possess Tao	187
142		Where Is Tao?	188
143		Fame	189
144		On Tao	190
		Sources	191

Introduction

Imagine old-time China when people heard their news and tales from wandering storytellers. In the villages, these chroniclers might have shouted for people to gather under a shady tree. In the cities, they might have banged on a cymbal to attract people moving through parks or marketplaces. They were the journalists, entertainers, dramatists, and comedians of their day, and they jostled for attention among acrobats, fortune-tellers, bards, minstrels, commentators, healers, and mendicants. Whoever was the most exciting, the most informative, and the most intriguing was the winner who drew the largest crowds. Imagine, then, these people coming to your town, stirring up the sleepy populace, fascinating listeners with stories both familiar and novel, and perhaps even inspiring a few to run away to find adventure.

All the stories in this book are thousands of years old. They had to be special to last through years of telling and retelling, and they were compelling enough for visitors to carry them beyond the borders of China, to translate them, and to retell them in other lands. They expressed great wisdom by fusing anecdote with philosophy. The stories are frequently humorous, ribald, irreverent, pithy, or sarcastic—but they always speak to great and universal truths.

Their form often took on the guise of tall tales—distances and measurements were highly exaggerated, time was indistinct (the better to put us in an eternal present), historical personages were made into tropes or used for poking fun,

fictional characters were thrown in willy-nilly, and an age of legendary kings was invoked as a utopian ideal—even though those centuries were already in the distant past when these anecdotes were first told. (In this book, you can tell when a person was real by dates given in parentheses at their first mention.)

These stories were recorded in scattered writings, but it's apparent that those texts were scaffolds for further telling. The ideas continued to evolve over long periods. They were not organized into static persuasive texts but remained a seemingly random jumble of themes. They borrow similar formats from one another, sometimes reworking themes from different angles and reinforcing the idea that these tales were meant for improvisation, adaptation, and variation. The stories were passed on as people needed them, their wording meandered creatively, and they were embellished to this day as storytelling was always meant to do.

This process was augmented by how learning developed in the ancient tradition: the teachers insisted on memorization and experience over the written word. Many of these stories originate from the era of The Hundred Schools of Thought (sixth century–221 BCE), a time that ended when the First Emperor grew frustrated at the many arguments of bickering scholars and ordered most of the books in the empire burned. The Emperor Wenzong (r. 827–840) of the Tang Dynasty made a valiant attempt at standardization by ordering twelve classics carved into the front and back of 114 massive stone slabs and installed in public so that no one

could ever argue about versions again. But those steles stood in one place—the Imperial College in Chang'an (now Xi'an). The country was vast. A large number of individual teachers continued to wander the roads and sail the rivers looking for pupils or, in emulation of their greatest example, Confucius, who sought the patronage of an emperor, duke, or at least a rich merchant family with whom they would live. The storytellers went everywhere too, with more itinerant goals, but with similar messages.

As a result, the stories evolved into myths. They became the essential distillation of shared wisdom and vital gifts to anyone who heard them. Each generation adapted them and found fresh understanding in them. Accordingly, the stories in this book have been edited and their language has been updated. If you're curious about the sources, initials in parentheses and a key at the end of the book provide identification.

In imperial times, it was seldom safe to criticize officials, let alone the king or emperor. But these stories don't shy away from that, holding the rich and powerful up to ridicule and satirizing the very logic, morality, history, and rhetoric that had been carved into stone.

The storytellers took the dry format of dialogue between a master teacher and student, debates between philosophers, or the interchanges between minister and ruler and inflated them wildly. The point was unabashedly political: turn away from pomposity and corruption, remember the common people, share generously, and be aware of the pitfalls of being king. These stories speak truth to power. That helps us,

because each generation wrestles with the same questions of inequality, justice, and social good.

When I was a boy, I didn't get specific lessons on how to live. I got stories. If I asked why I had to believe some concept, a person such as my grandmother might reply with, "This is true because of what happened to the Yellow Emperor," and then the story would follow. What intrigues me is that this habit hasn't changed even after China's revolution, rapid modernization, digital technology, and global culture. People still say, "It's true because . . ." before they invoke a story that is more than two thousand years old.

We need stories. They help us make sense of who we are and how we got here. They keep us sane as we try to absorb our experiences, our aging, and our thoughts. We want to know that we're living in a way that measures up, and we do that by comparing ourselves to stories. We tell stories to children to prepare them for the world. Stories help us visualize the future by taking the messages of yesterday and helping us get tomorrow right.

xiv The stories collected in this book speak to two important emotions: fear and love. Repeatedly, fear is identified as the greatest threat. Even death is acceptable, as it must be, but fear is shown to be the more troublesome of the two. We need not fear as long as we gain insight into ourselves and we understand that we are part of nature and connected to one another. We are urged to turn away from indigence and instead seek clarity of character. At the same time, love is held up as one of the greatest qualities of life. We are urged to love all of

existence, to see ourselves on a par with all creatures, to show kindness to others, to love ourselves even if that means others might consider us ugly or "useless," and to embrace love as the most honest truth of the heart.

The majority of these stories are taken from two Taoist sources, Zhuangzi (370–287 BCE) and Liezi (c. fifth century BCE). We don't know much about either author. That ambiguity would delight them both, because they would have said that it was not the person that mattered but rather the lessons. Both books belong to the Taoist Canon, a collection of about 1,400 texts.

The word *Tao* appears frequently in these texts. Just as the storytellers wrapped great truths in legendary tales, the word *Tao* was used in contexts from the mundane to the extraordinary. *Tao* means a road, a way, a method, a principle, or a truth. It might be appended to the name of a thoroughfare, and it can just as easily indicate all the cosmos. The fact that the word has so many different meanings shows that it runs through every part of life. It's completely consistent that the word is used for the names of bars, in jokes, or even in the teenage slang of today. *Tao* is that flexible because it is part of everything, from daily banter to sacred song.

The ideograph for *Tao* (pinyin: *dao*) combines a picture of a head with the symbol for walking. *Tao* is a person on a path. By extension, everything in the universe has a path. Everything moves and proceeds in its own natural way. The essence of a good life is to match one's personal way with the universal way. You might see yourself as that person on the

path, pausing in your travel to hear a new story, and passing your own on to others.

Taoism is China's indigenous spiritual tradition. That's why some of these stories refer to the beginnings of Chinese civilization, to the times of the legendary emperors such as the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yao. When these stories begin with a reference to ancient times, it tells us that we are a part of a long continuum of those who contemplated existence. We are each unique and yet we face the same choices as those who lived before us.

These remarkable wisdom-stories combine spirituality, philosophy, cosmology, governance, observations of the human condition, frank talk about life and death, and the eternal continuity of this marvelous word. They urge us to be simple, plain, and honest. Contentment, kindness, independence, understanding, and gratitude are all that we need. In telling us about people from all eras and roles in life, the storytellers urge us to be grateful, for we receive every benefit from this world.

Tao is a journey. Whether we live in one place all our lives or whether we are fortunate enough to travel all over this globe, we each go through our own life's journey. We are part of a grand procession, finding our place in our area, our time, and in history. In these stories, the world is called heaven and earth and that's exactly where we travel. Heaven and earth are both time and place; they provide the pace and setting for our entire lives. We need do nothing more than move to that rhythm. Our lives form our story: they tell our Tao.

1 | Fishing for Something Big

Prince Ren got a huge iron hook, a thick black silk line, a bamboo pole, and fifty steers for bait. He squatted on Kuaiji Mountain and cast his line into the far-off East Ocean. The prince fished every morning for an entire year, but didn't catch anything.

Finally, a monstrous fish gobbled the bait. It dived, dragging hook and line behind it. Then it burst to the surface, beating its fins, frothing the waters, and raising mountainous white waves. The whole sea shook and the noise was like demons fighting gods. People were terrified for a thousand kilometers around.

The prince finally landed the fish, cut the body into pieces, and dried them. Crowds came from far away in the east and north to eat their fill.

For generations since, roaming storytellers have repeated this tale as they tried to outdo one another. They never mention this: what if Prince Ren had held his rod and line over ditches and had just tried to catch minnows? Would he have caught such a big fish?

Likewise, those who dress up small fables to get a position for themselves are not of wide intelligence—just as anyone who doesn't know the story of Prince Ren really isn't able to lead the world. (Z)

