Introduction
Traditionally, Laozi is said to have been an older contemporary of Kongzi "Confucius" and the author of the Laozi or Daodejing. But most contemporary scholars regard Laozi (literally "Old Master") as a mythical character and the Laozi to be a composite work. The present version of the text consists of short passages, from a variety of sources, over half of which are rhymed. These were collected together into a single volume of eighty-one chapters that were then divided into two books. Book I consists of chapters one through thirty-seven, the dao, "Way," half of the text; Book II consists of chapters thirty-eight through eighty-one, the de, "Virtue," half. On the basis of this organization, this version of the text came to be known as the Daodejing, which means simply "The Classic of Dao and De." This division in no way reflects the contents of the chapters themselves, except that the first chapter begins with the word dao and the thirty-eighth chapter begins by describing the highest de. The text may have reached its present form sometime during the third or perhaps second century B.C.E. Another version of the text, named after its place of discovery, Mawangdui, is similar in content and firmly dated to the middle of the second century B.C.E. But in the Mawangdui version, the order of the Books is reversed, giving us the Dedaojing.

Though it was probably cobbled together from different sources, the Laozi may well have been assembled during a relatively short period of time and perhaps by a single editor. When it was put together, China was near the end of a prolonged era of fierce interstate rivalry known as the Warring States Period. The text can be understood, at least in part, as a reaction to this troubled age.
In it we hear the lament of a time tired of war and chaos, one yearning for a bygone age of innocence, security, and peace. The text denounces wars of expansion and government corruption, and traces both complaints to the unbounded greed and ambition of those in power. These ideas are connected to the view that excessive desire per se is bad and the related belief that our "real" or "natural" desires are actually quite modest and limited. The text claims that it is unnatural to have excessive desires and having them will not only not lead to a satisfying life but paradoxically to destitution, want, alienation, and self-destruction.

The Laozi appeals to an earlier golden age in human history, before people made sharp distinctions among things. This was a time when values and qualities were not clearly distinguished, when things simply were as they were and people acted out of pre-reflective spontaneity. Chapter thirty-eight describes the history of the decline of the Way from an earlier golden age to its present debased state. The dao declined as civilization and human self-consciousness arose. The Laozi urges us to return to the earlier, natural state when the Way was fully realized in the world. We are to "untangle," "blunt," and "round of" the sharp corners of our present life and let our "wheels move only along old (and presumably more comfortable) ruts."

According to the Laozi, the dao is the source, sustenance, and ideal state or all things in the world. It is "hidden" and it contains within it the patterns of all that we see, but it is not ontologically transcendent. In the apt metaphor of the text, it is the "root" of all things. The dao is ziran, "so of itself" or "spontaneous," and its unencumbered activity brings about various natural states of affairs through wuwei, "nonaction." Human beings have a place in the dao but are not particularly exalted. They are simply things among things (a view well represented by the marvelous landscape paintings inspired by Daoism). Because of their unbridled desires and their unique capacity to think, act intentionally, and alter their nature—thus acting contrary to wuwei and bringing about states that are not ziran—humans tend to forsake their proper place and upset the natural harmony of the Way. The Laozi seeks to undo the consequences of such misguided human views and practices and lead us to "return" to the earlier ideal. The text is more a form of philosophical therapy than the presentation of a theory. We are to be challenged by its paradoxes and moved by its images and poetic cadence more than by any arguments it presents.
A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless (wuming), it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.
And so,
Always eliminate desires in order to observe its mysteries;
Always have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
These two come forth in unity but diverge in name.
Their unity is known as an enigma.
Within this enigma is yet a deeper enigma.
The gate of all mysteries!

The opening line of the text has been translated in many different ways. The problem is there is no way to render in English both the nominal and verbal uses of the word dao. More literally, it might be translated, “The dao that can be ‘talked about,’ or ‘named,’ or ‘followed,’ is not the constant dao.” Confucius had emphasized the importance of naming, the “rectification of names” (zhengming); and here the text begins by emphasizing the impossibility of capturing the dao with names or words, thus emphasizing the nameless (wuming) instead. Throughout the text there are several important terms beginning with wu, such as wuming (nameless), but also wuyu (desireless), wuzhi (nonwisdom), and wuwei (nonaction).

The oscillation of yin and yang is the movement of the dao. The text emphasizes yin qualities, perhaps indicating that the message of the text is meant as a yin antidote to a culture that, during the Warring States period, clearly suffered from an excess of yang.
Everyone in the world knows that when the beautiful strives to be beautiful, it is repulsive. Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good. And so,

To have and to lack generate each other.
Difficult and easy give form to each other.
Long and short off-set each other.
High and low incline into each other.
Note and rhythm harmonize with each other.
Before and after follow each other.
This is why the sages abide in the business of nonaction (wuwei), and practice the teaching that is without words.
They work with the myriad creatures and turn none away.
They produce without possessing,
They act with no expectation of reward.
When their work is done, they do not linger,
And, by not lingering, merit never deserts them.

The term wu-wei, as A.C. Graham explains, “is often translated by such innocuous phrases as ‘non-action’ to avoid giving the impression that Taoist recommend idleness, but it seems better to keep the paradoxical force of the Chinese expression. Wei is ordinary human action, deliberated for a purpose, in contrast to the spontaneous processes of nature which are ‘so of themselves.’ Man takes pride in distinguishing himself from nature by his purposive action; Lao-tzu by a classic reversal describes the behaviour of the sage as Doing Nothing” (Graham 1989, p. 232).

Not paying honor to the worthy leads the people to avoid contention.
Not showing reverence for precious goods leads them not to steal.
Not making a display of what is desirable leads their hearts away from chaos.
This is why sages bring things to order by opening people’s hearts (xin) and filling their bellies.
They weaken the people’s commitments and strengthen their bones;
They make sure that the people are without knowledge (wuzhi) or desires (wuyu);
And that those with knowledge do not dare to act.
Sages enact nonaction (wuwei) and everything becomes well ordered.
In the Chinese conception of human beings, there is no distinction between the heart and the mind. Thus *xin* could be rendered “heart-mind.”

The Way is like an empty vessel;  
No use could ever fill it up.  
Vast and deep!  
It seems to be the ancestor of the myriad creatures.  
It blunts their sharpness;  
Untangles their tangles;  
Softens their glare;  
Merges with their dust.  
Deep and clear!  
It seems to be there.  
I do not know whose child it is;  
It is the image of what was before the Lord himself.

The character *di* is translated here as “Lord,” a name for the supreme ancestral spirit of ancient China.

Heaven and earth (*tian*) are not benevolent (*ren*);  
They treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.  
Sages are not benevolent;  
They treat the people as straw dogs.  
Is not the space between Heaven and earth like a bellows?  
Empty yet inexhaustible!  
Work it and more will come forth.  
An excess of speech will lead to exhaustion.  
It is better to hold on to the mean.

The contrast of the naturalism of Daoism with the humanism of Confucianism is brought out in the first line. Benevolence (*ren*) is one of the key virtues of the exemplary person for Confucius. The Confucian view is that one attunes to the *Dao* by following what is exemplary or best in human culture and human virtues. The character *tian* (Heaven) is translated here as “Heaven and Earth” as it is often used in the *Daodejing* as an abbreviation for *tiandi* “Heaven and earth,” a phrase that refers to the impersonal forces of nature or the regular operations of the natural world. “Straw dogs” were used as ceremonial offerings. Before and during the ceremony they were protected and cherished, but as soon as the ceremony ended, they were discarded and defiled.
The spirit of the valley never dies;  
She is called the “Enigmatic Female.”  
The portal of the Enigmatic Female;  
Is called the root of Heaven and earth.  
An unbroken, gossamer thread;  
It seems to be there.  
But use will not unsettle it.

The valley spirit is called xuanpin, from xuan (mysterious, profound, secret, dark) and pin (woman, mother, womb); thus, the “hidden creator,” or “enigmatic” or “dark female” is the men tiandi “gate” of Heaven and Earth. The image of the “portal” or “gateway” of the female is used as an analogy for the source or the “root” of Heaven and earth (or all things).

Heaven is long lasting;  
Earth endures.  
Heaven is able to be long lasting and earth is able to endure,  
because they do not live for themselves.  
And so, they are able to be long lasting and to endure.  
This is why sages put themselves last and yet come out first;  
Treat themselves as unimportant and yet are preserved.  
Is it not because they have no thought of themselves,  
that they are able to perfect themselves?

Once again, the sages model themselves on the nature or “Heaven and earth.” The dao of Laozi is to tune into nature, and thus in putting himself last, the sage comes out first. A.C. Graham explains: “Heaven and earth last forever because, unlike man, they do not try to prolong their existence . . . if the sage in his perfect unselfishness is no longer distinguishing himself from heaven and earth is he not in some sense participating in their immortality ” (Graham 1989, p. 230).

The highest good is like water.  
Water is good at benefitting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them.  
It resides in the places that people find repellent, and so comes close to the Way.  
In a residence, the good lies in location.  
In hearts, the good lies in depth.  
In interactions with others, the good lies in being gentle and kind.
In words, the good lies in trustworthiness.
In government, the good lies in orderliness.
In carrying out one’s business, the good lies in ability.
In actions, the good lies in timeliness.

Only by avoiding contention can one avoid blame.

The metaphor of water is introduced. Alan Watts’s book on Daoism bears the title *The Watercourse Way*. Ames and Hall explain that the good (shan) is “always knowing where to be, committing ourselves utterly in our relationships, being generous in our transactions, making good on what we say, being successful both in service and in governance, and seizing the moment” (Ames & Hall 2003, p.88).

To hold the vessel upright in order to fill it is not as good as to stop in time.
If you make your blade to keen it will not hold its edge.
When gold and jade fill the hall none can hold on to them.
To be haughty when wealth and honor come your way is to bring disaster upon yourself.
To withdraw when the work is done is the Way of Heaven.

The *dao* of tian (nature) is to stop short before overdoing it. Perhaps this passage provides a clue to what sort of action, what possible technological developments, would be in accord with the Daoist notion of *wu-wei*.

Embracing your soul and holding on to the One, can you keep them from departing.
Concentrating your *qi*, “vital energies,” and attaining the utmost suppleness, can you be a child?
Cleaning and purifying your enigmatic mirror, can you erase every flaw?
Caring for the people and ordering the state, can you eliminate all knowledge?
When the portal of Heaven opens and closes, can you play the part of the feminine?
Comprehending all within the four directions, can you reside in nonaction (*wuwei*)?
To produce them!
To nurture them!
To produce without possessing;
To act with no expectation of reward;
To lead without lording over;
Such is Enigmatic Virtue (*de*).

According to A.C. Graham. “much of the *Daodejing* can be read as a metaphor for breathing exercises” (Graham 1989, p. 90).
Thirty spokes are joined in the hub of a wheel.  
But only by relying on what is not there (wu), do we have the use of the carriage.  
By adding and removing clay we form a vessel.  
But only by relying on what is not there (wu), do we have the use of the vessel.  
By carving out doors and windows we make a room.  
But only by relying on what is not there (wu), do we have the use of the room.  
And so, what is there is the basis for profit.  
What is not there is the basis for use.  

The value of emptiness (wu) is emphasized. It is the center hole, the empty hub of a wheel, or the emptiness of a clay vessel that makes it useful.  

In ancient times, the best and most accomplished scholars;  
Were subtle, mysterious, enigmatic, and far-reaching,  
Their profundity was beyond understanding.  
Because they were beyond understanding, only with difficulty can we try to describe them:  
Poised, like one who must ford a stream in winter.  
Cautious, like one who fears his neighbors on every side.  
Reserved, like a visitor.  
Opening up, like ice about to break.  
Honest, like the unhewn wood (pu).  
Broad, like a valley.  
Turbid, like muddy water.  

Who can, through stillness, gradually make muddied water clean?  
Who can, through movement, gradually stir to life what has long been still?  
Those who preserve this Way do not desire fullness.  
And, because they are not full, they have no need for renewal.  

The “unhewn wood” or “uncarved block” (pu) is a symbol for anything in its natural state. This notion has had a strong influence upon East Asian aesthetics. One can see this in the wabi-sabi aesthetic in much of traditional Japanese ceramics.
When the great Way is abandoned, there are benevolence (ren) and righteousness (yi).
When wisdom (zhi) and intelligence (hui) come forth, there is great hypocrisy.
When the six familial relationships (xiao) are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children.
When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers.

The critique of Confucianism is obvious in calling into question the Confucian virtues of ren, yi, zhi, hui, and xiao.

Cut off sageliness, abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit one-hundred-fold.
Cut off benevolence, abandon righteousness, and the people will return to being filial and kind.
Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more.
This might leave the people lacking in culture.
So give them something with which to identify:
    Manifest plainness.
    Embrace Simplicity.

Those who are crooked will be perfected.
Those who are bent will be straight.
Those who are empty will be full.
Those who are worn will be renewed.
Those who have little will gain.
Those who have plenty will be confounded.
This is why the sages embrace the One and serve as models for the whole world.
    They do not make a display of themselves and so are illustrious.
    They do not affirm their own views and so are well-known.
    They do not brag about themselves and so are accorded merit.
    They do not boast about themselves and so are heard of for a long time.
Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them.
The ancient saying “Those who are crooked will be perfect” is not without substance!
Truly the sages are and remain perfect.

Here we see the oscillation between opposites again, and the ability to see the oscillations of yin and yang is perhaps what is meant by the sages embracing the one. A. C. Graham explains: “Lao-tzu frequently calls the undivided the One, although generally in relation to the man or thing which ‘embrace the One’ or ‘grasps
the One”. As a name however the One is no more adequate than any other. As soon as you try to conceive the Way you conceive the One, but as soon as you conceive the One you conceive the many” (Graham 1989, p. 222).

23
To be sparing with words is what comes naturally.
And so,
A blustery wind does not last all morning;
A heavy downpour does not last all day.
Who produces these?
Heaven and earth!
If not even Heaven and earth can keep things going for a long time,
How much less can human beings?
This is why one should follow the Way in all that one does.
One who follows the Way identifies with the Way.
One who follows loss identifies with loss.
The Way is pleased to have those who identify with the Way.
Virtue is pleased to have those who identify with Virtue.
Loss is pleased to have those who identify with loss.
Those lacking in trust are not trusted.

25
There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.
Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.
I do not know its proper name;
I have given it the style “the Way.”
Forced to give it a proper name, I would call it “Great.”
The Great passes on;
What passes on extends into the distance;
What extends into the distance returns to its source.
And so the Way is great;
Heaven is great;
Earth is great;
And a true kind too is great.
In the universe are four things that are great and the true king is first among them.
People model themselves on the earth.
The earth models itself on Heaven.
Heaven models itself on the Way.
The Way models itself on what is natural (ziran).

This is a well-known chapter that has often been read as suggesting a Daoist cosmogony or creation story. Ames and Hall provide a caution about this interpretation: “A familiar interpretation of this chapter is that it offers one of the earliest Chinese cosmogonies, referencing some primal origin behind the discriminations of our everyday world. This reading becomes problematic if we think in terms of some initial beginning that is independent of the process itself. For the Daoist, the flow of experience has no beginning and no end” (Ames & Hall 2003, p. 116). We see also, once again, the problem with naming the dao. The word “dao” is not its proper name, but one can call it “dao,” or one can call it “great.” The last stanza is significant, and A.C. Graham provides this comment: “An alternative to saying the name ‘Way’ is inadequate is to accept it but proceed to identify something still farther back, the first of what if continued would be an infinite series. The same stanza ends by picking the ‘so of itself’ (ziran), pure spontaneity” (Graham 1989, p. 226).

Introduction and Translation by Philip J. Ivanhoe:


Other references:
