

Lao Tzu

Tao Te Ching

A guide to the interpretation of the foundational book of Taoism

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Chapter 48

Seeking the Dao day by day you decrease

Seeking knowledge, day by day you increase.

Seeking the Dao, day by day you decrease.

Decreasing and again decreasing, you reach non-doing.

Through non-doing nothing remains undone.

In order to possess the world constantly use no affairs.

If you have affairs, you are not worthy to possess the world.

為
道
日
損

***Seeking knowledge, day by day you increase.
Seeking the Dao, day by day you decrease.***

Alternative translations

Pursue knowledge, gain daily. Pursue TAO, lose daily. (Addiss and Lombardo)

If one pursues learning, (knowledge) increases day by day. If one pursues the Way, (knowledge) decreases day by day. (Izutsu)

For study / every day a little more / for the Way / every day a little less (Larre)

Learning consists in daily accumulating; the practice of Tao consists in daily diminishing. (Wu)

***In order to possess the world constantly use no affairs.
If you have affairs, you are not worthy to possess the world.***

Alternative translations

Take the entire world as nothing. Make the least effort, and the world escapes you. (Addiss and Lombardo)

The world is won by those who let it go! But when you try and try, the world is then beyond the winning. (Blakney)

Renouncing all is gaining the universe / having a goal / is being inadequate to gain the universe (Houang and Leyris)

The Empire always befalls to the leisurely / a man who is busy is inadequate to rule the Empire (Larre)

True mastery can be gained by letting things go their own way. It can't be gained by interfering. (Mitchell)

To win the world, one must renounce all. If one still has private ends to serve, one will never be able to win the world. (Wu)

The Daoist path is the opposite of building an ego. It is not accumulating knowledge, forming a personality, self-realization. It is more like dissolving, disappearing. The adept's personality is there less and less, until what is left is a doing that properly does no longer belong to him or her, because it is more akin to a letting go, a letting happen than to a deliberate action. Without personal goals, without 'affairs', her action becomes pure spontaneity. It becomes part of the natural forces. The adept becomes a hollow bamboo, a flute through which existence plays its melody. Such a person 'holds the great image', and to her 'the world comes, it comes and suffers no harm, but dwells in contentment, equanimity and peace' (Chapter 35). Such a person becomes like the great useless tree of Zhuangzi's story, offering shelter to countless creatures in its shade (see the commentary to Chapter 20).

That is what Laozi means by 'possessing the world'. If you are identified with an ego, if you have personal goals, if you have 'affairs', you may be sitting on the imperial throne, but you do not possess the world: it is rather the world possessing you.

'Affairs', *shi*⁴, is 'affair, matter, thing, business, occupation, act, do, service, accomplish, manage'. It is therefore a term denoting activity, involvement *par excellence*. The combination *wu*² *shi*⁴, where *wu*² is 'without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence' is therefore in the first place 'non-doing', 'non-action', 'no affairs'. But notice that the meanings 'the void's doing', 'non-being's affairs' also resonate in it. Similarly, since *you*³ is 'with, have, possess, obtain, keep, be, exist, become, there is, being, presence', *you*³ *shi*⁴ can be read also as 'being's affairs'. Only 'non-being's affairs', action that is rooted in emptiness, can 'possess the world', while 'being's affairs', ordinary action arising out of identification with this apparently solid reality, is inadequate to 'possess the world'.

Verbatim translation

為	wei2,4	087, claw	Seeking	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
學	xue2	039, child	knowledge,	study, learn, knowledge, science, school, doctrine, literate, scholar
日	ri4	072, sun	day by day	sun, day, daily, day by day, season
益	yi4	108, dish	increase.	increase, augment, add, benefit, profit, help, rich, abundant
為	wei2,4	087, claw	Seeking	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
道	dao4	162, go	the Dao,	road, path, way, walk, principle, doctrine, guide, speak, tell, discourse, dao, Dao, Way
日	ri4	072, sun	day by day	sun, day, daily, day by day, season
損	sun3	064, hand	decrease.	diminish, decrease, damage, weaken, loss, ruin; hexagram 41 of the <i>Yijing</i>
損	sun3	064, hand	Decreasing	diminish, decrease, damage, weaken, loss, ruin; hexagram 41 of the <i>Yijing</i>
之	zhi1	004, oblique stroke		analogue of the saxon genitive; previously mentioned object; euphonic or final particle
又	you4	029, hand	(and) again	again, and, also, moreover, on the other hand (etym: open right hand)
損	sun3	064, hand	decreasing,	diminish, decrease, damage, weaken, loss, ruin; hexagram 41 of the <i>Yijing</i>
以	yi3	009, man		auxiliary and mark of the object, use, consider as, treat as, because, for, with

至	zhi4	133, reach	reach	arrive, reach, culminate, highest degree, top, summit, most, complete (etym: arrow stuck in the ground)
於	yu2	070, square		preposition indicating location, motion toward, relation, in, to, from, with, while, etc.
無	wu2	086, fire	non-	without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence
為	wei2,4	087, claw	doing.	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
無	wu2	086, fire	(Through) non-	without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence
為	wei2,4	087, claw	doing	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
而	er2	126, and		and, also, therefore, then, but, yet, as if (etym: roots or beard)
無	wu2	086, fire	nothing	without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence
不	bu4	001, one	(remains) not	no, not, not be, there is not, never, no one, without, must not
為	wei2,4	087, claw	done.	wei2: do, act, make, create, manage, be, become, attend to, consider as; wei4: for, because
取	qu3	029, hand	(In order) to possess	grasp, grab, seize, take possession, receive, accept, choose, adopt, call, attract (etym: hand grasping a handle or ear)
天	tian1	037, great	heaven	heaven, firmament, sky, nature; tian ¹ xia ⁴ : everything under heaven, the world
下	xia4	001, one	under	below, under, bottom, down, fall, descend, low; tian ¹ xia ⁴ : all under heaven, the world
常	chang2	050, cloth	constantly	constant, lasting, always, frequent, absolute, permanent
以	yi3	009, man	use	auxiliary and mark of the object, use, consider as, treat as, because, for, with
無	wu2	086, fire	no	without, not, not be, not exist, nothing, void, hollow, emptiness, non-being, absence
事	shi4	006, barb	affairs.	affair, matter, thing, business, occupation, act, do, service, accomplish, manage

及	ji2	029, hand	If	reach, arrive, until, be up to, profit from, and, with, if
其	qi2	012, eight	you	general possessive adjective and personal pronoun, he, she, it, my, your, his, etc.
有	you3	074, moon	have	with, have, possess, obtain, keep, be, exist, become, there is, being, presence
事	shi4	006, barb	affairs,	affair, matter, thing, business, occupation, act, do, service, accomplish, manage
不	bu4	001, one	(you) are not	no, not, not be, there is not, never, no one, without, must not
足	zu2	157, foot	worthy	foot, sufficient, enough, complete, worthy (etym: stepping foot, with ankle and toes)
以	yi3	009, man		auxiliary and mark of the object, use, consider as, treat as, because, for, with
取	qu3	029, hand	to possess	grasp, grab, seize, take possession, receive, accept, choose, adopt, call, attract (etym: hand grasping a handle or ear)
天	tian1	037, great	heaven	heaven, firmament, sky, nature; tian ¹ xia ⁴ : everything under heaven, the world
下	xia4	001, one	under.	below, under, bottom, down, fall, descend, low; tian1 xia4: all under heaven, the world