



CHAPTER 1

The Gateway of All Mysteries



Original Chinese Text

道可道，非常道。
名可名，非常名。
無名天地之始；
有名萬物之母。
故常無欲，以觀其妙；
常有欲，以觀其徼。
此兩者，同出而異名，
同謂之玄。
玄之又玄，眾妙之門。



Poetic Taoist Translation

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.

Named: the mother of ten thousand things.

Free from desire, perceive the mystery.

Caught in desire, see only the manifestations.

These two spring from one source but differ in name;

Both are called profound.

Profound and again profound—

The gateway of all wonders.



Taoist Alchemy & Meditation Commentary

Here Laozi strikes at the root of our deepest confusion. We believe that by naming things, we possess them; by speaking of the Tao, we approach it. But the Tao that submits to language has already slipped away. This is not mystical obscurantism—it is precise phenomenology. Stand in stillness and observe: the moment you label your experience, you have stepped outside it. The eternal Tao flows beneath all our words, undiminished by our failure to grasp it, infinitely patient with our fumbling attempts to speak the unspeakable.

In the practice of internal cultivation, this opening verse serves as both warning and invitation. The center cannot be found through anatomy alone. It emerges only when the practitioner abandons the grasping mind and allows awareness to settle into stillness. Here, in this quiet settling, the alchemical work begins. The breath, that vital thread connecting our inner being to the cosmos, becomes our anchor. We learn to "hold the essence" without clutching, to release the unnecessary without forcing. Each exhalation carries away the weight of our naming, our wanting, our endless categorization of experience.

Wang Bi understood this verse as pointing toward the transcendent source that cannot be captured by concepts. For him, "玄之又玄" (mystery within mystery) represents not vagueness but precision—the recognition that ultimate reality operates at a depth our surface mind cannot fathom. Heshang Gong read the same words through the lens of cultivation: the nameless is our original nature before conditioning, the named is our engagement with the world of form. Both are needed; neither alone suffices.

The practitioner who embodies this teaching moves through life with a peculiar freedom. No longer compelled to fix reality in place, he flows with circumstances while remaining rooted in the unnameable source. In sitting meditation, this manifests as the willingness to let thoughts arise and dissolve without grasping. In standing practice, it appears as the body's natural alignment when the controlling mind finally releases. In daily action, it becomes Wu Wei—not the absence of doing, but doing without the fiction of a doer. This is the gateway of all wonders: not a door to be forced open, but a threshold we cross the moment we stop trying to cross it.

Four Perspectives

Wang Bi (王弼) Philosophical Perspective

Wang Bi read this verse as a statement about a fundamental structure of reality. The Tao that can be spoken (道可道) belongs to the realm of the expressible—useful for navigation but ultimately a finger pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. The true Tao (常道) is the nameless ground from which all naming arises. For Wang Bi, the crucial move is from "無名" (nameless) to "有名" (named)—from the undifferentiated origin to the manifest world. This is not a temporal sequence but an ontological relationship. The named always depends on the nameless, as form depends on emptiness. The sage perceives this dependency and therefore dwells in the uncarved simplicity beneath all categories, acting in accordance with 自然 (naturalness) rather than imposed patterns. "玄之又玄" is not mystification but the recognition that reality operates through depths within depths, each revelation opening onto further mystery.

Heshang Gong (河上公) Cultivation Perspective

The Heshang Gong commentary reads this verse as direct guidance for the cultivator. The Tao that can be practiced through specific methods—breath regulation, dietary discipline, moral cultivation—is valuable but not ultimate. Beyond technique lies the eternal Tao accessed only through complete surrender of the discriminating mind. "無名天地之始" points to our original nature before the mind divided the world into categories. In meditation, we return to this state: not by forcing blankness but by allowing the natural settling that occurs when we cease agitating the waters of consciousness. "有名萬物之母" acknowledges our necessary engagement with the world of form. The balance between 無欲 (desirelessness) and 有欲 (desire) is not about extinguishing all wants but about cultivating the capacity to hold desire lightly, observing how it colors our perception. Through this practice, we become vessels for the Tao's nurturing power.

Bodhidharma / Chan (禪) Perspective

From the Chan perspective, this opening verse cuts through millennia of philosophical elaboration with a single stroke. What is the Tao that cannot be spoken? Show me right now, without opening your mouth! The Diamond Sutra declares that the Buddha spoke for forty-nine years and never uttered a single word. This is not paradox for its own sake but direct pointing to what lies before thinking. "無名" is original mind—awareness before it splits into observer and observed. "有名" is the ten thousand things that arise when mind moves. But here is the secret the verse reveals: these two "spring from one source." Subject and object, silence and speech, emptiness and form are not-two. Chan practice is not about choosing the nameless over the named but about realizing their fundamental non-duality. "玄之又玄" is not a distant mystery but this very moment, seen clearly.

What color is the wall in front of you?

Internal Martial Arts (內家拳) Perspective

Every martial tradition knows the distance between the technique that can be named and the art that cannot. The kata, the form, the drill, the combination—these can be taught and practiced. The single whip in Taijiquan, the hip throw in Judo, the double-leg in wrestling—all can be named and drilled. But what makes a fighter alive in the moment cannot be transmitted through instruction alone. It emerges only when the practitioner stops performing technique and begins responding from something deeper. "無名天地之始" is the state before the fight: stillness from which any response can emerge. "有名萬物之母" is the generation of specific martial action. The skilled practitioner does not choose between these but embodies their unity—technique forgotten yet completely available, self dissolved yet completely present. In Taijiquan push hands, the practitioner's hands move before the mind decides—this is 聽勁 (listening energy), the state beyond technique. The grappler who flows between positions without deciding, the striker whose hands find openings before the mind names them, the defender who

yields at exactly the right moment: all have touched what this verse describes. You respond to what has no name yet with actions that have no deliberate form.



Key Characters

道 (*dào*)

The Way — ineffable cosmic principle; both path and source; that which cannot be captured yet pervades all

...

常 (*cháng*)

Eternal, constant — what endures beyond the flux of names and forms; the unchanging within change

...

名 (*míng*)

Name — the human act of categorizing reality; useful but inevitably partial; the net that cannot catch water

...

無 (*wú*)

Non-being — not mere emptiness but pregnant void; the womb from which all phenomena emerge

...

有 (*yǒu*)

Being — existence, presence; the manifest world; named reality that depends on the nameless

...

欲 (*yù*)

Desire — wanting that colors perception; neither condemned nor glorified but observed

...

妙 (*miào*)

Subtle wonder — the mysterious quality perceptible only when desire falls away; the marvelous

...

徼 (*jiào*)

Boundary, manifestation — what desire reveals; the edges and limits of formed things

...

玄 (*xuán*)

Profound mystery — darkness that illuminates; depth beyond ordinary comprehension

...

門 (*mén*)

Gateway — the threshold between understanding and that which exceeds understanding



Cross-References

This chapter resonates with:

- **Chapter 4** — Tao as empty vessel, bottomless; elaborates the inexhaustible nature of the nameless source
- **Chapter 14** — The formless form; looking, listening, grasping yet not attaining; direct parallel to the ineffable
 - **Chapter 25** — "Something complete before heaven and earth"; names the nameless as "Tao" while acknowledging the inadequacy
- **Chapter 40** — "Return is the Tao's movement"; the dynamic between being and non-being given direction

The verse ends where all true teachings end: at a threshold. Not with answers but with an opening. Step through.



CHAPTER 8

The Way of Water



Original Chinese Text

上善若水。
水善利萬物而不爭，
處眾人之所惡，故幾於道。
居善地，心善淵，
與善仁，言善信，
正善治，事善能，
動善時。
夫唯不爭，故無尤。



Poetic Taoist Translation

The highest good is like water.

Water benefits the ten thousand things without contending.

It dwells in places others despise—

thus it approaches the Tao.

In dwelling, be close to the earth.

In mind, be deep as a pool.

In giving, be kind.

In speaking, be true.

In governing, be orderly.

In working, be capable.

In moving, be timely.

Only because it does not contend,

it is beyond reproach.



Taoist Alchemy & Meditation Commentary

Water is Laozi's supreme metaphor for the Tao in action. It nourishes all things without preference. It seeks the lowest places where others refuse to go. It has no fixed form yet fills every container. It yields to pressure yet wears away the hardest stone. In contemplating water, we contemplate the nature of effective action itself.

For the practitioner, water teaches the principle that governs all cultivation: seek the low place. The mind that insists on rising—competing, analyzing, controlling—exhausts itself. The mind that settles downward, like water finding its level, discovers a stillness that generates without effort. When the practitioner stops agitating, the body's own intelligence proceeds of its own accord.

Wang Bi understood "does not contend" as the key to all the verse's teachings. Water does not fight the obstacle; it flows around it. It does not compete for the high position; it naturally fills the low. This non-contending is not weakness but the highest form of strength—the strength that accomplishes without creating opposition. Heshang Gong applied each line to specific cultivation practices: dwell like water (sink the Qi), be deep like a well (cultivate stillness), move in timely fashion (follow natural rhythms rather than forcing).

The seven excellences—dwelling, mind, giving, speaking, governing, working, moving—are not virtues to be cultivated through effort but natural expressions of the water-nature we already possess. When we stop contending, we discover we already know how to dwell peacefully, think deeply, give freely. The obstruction was never inadequacy but the interference of an anxious self trying too hard. Water does not try to be water. Neither does the sage try to be wise.

Four Perspectives

Wang Bi (王弼) Philosophical Perspective

Wang Bi sees in water the perfect image of Taoist ontology. The highest good is not a fixed quality but the responsive, adaptive functioning that meets each situation appropriately. Water has no agenda of its own—it simply follows the contours of what it meets. In this responsiveness lies its power to benefit all things. "Dwells in places others despise" reveals the sage's relation to convention. The positions that worldly ambition seeks—high, prominent, commanding—are precisely where water does not go. The sage finds power in what others overlook: the servant's position, the student's place, the low ground from which all heights can be surveyed. Wang Bi emphasizes that this is not self-denial but recognition: the high ground is exposed; the low ground is protected. The one who does not contend has no enemies. The one who claims nothing loses nothing.

Heshang Gong (河上公) Cultivation Perspective

Heshang Gong reads this verse as a complete guide to cultivation practice. "Dwell close to the earth" means root the awareness in the lower body—settle the attention downward rather than letting it float in the head. "Mind deep as a well" describes the quality of awareness in seated meditation: still, clear, unfathomable. Each of the seven excellences corresponds to a dimension of cultivated life. In giving, be kind—let Qi flow outward without attachment. In speaking, be true—do not scatter energy through false words. In working, be capable—but capable here means efficient, accomplishing much through little effort. The underlying principle is water's effortlessness: it does not try to be helpful; it simply benefits by being what it is. The cultivator who achieves this naturalness needs no technique—every action becomes cultivation, every moment becomes practice.

Bodhidharma / Chan (禪) Perspective

Chan seizes on the paradox: if the highest good is like water, what is this water? Is it wet? Can you show me? The verse points beyond itself to something that cannot be grasped. Water benefits without knowing it benefits. It dwells low without knowing low from high. This unknowing is its wisdom. "Does not contend"—but who could contend with water? Strike it and your fist passes through. Grab it and it flows between your fingers. This is original mind: impossible to oppose because there is nothing to oppose. The Chan practitioner discovers that all suffering comes from contending—with reality, with others, with oneself. Stop contending and there is nothing to reproach you—not because you have achieved something but because the one who could be reproached was a fiction from the beginning.

Internal Martial Arts (內家拳) Perspective

For the internal martial artist, water is not metaphor but literal instruction. Move like water: formless until the moment of contact, then filling every gap in the opponent's defense. Yield like water: receive force without opposing it, redirect without colliding. Persist like water: the Grand Canyon was carved not by a single blow but by patient, continuous flow. "Dwell close to the earth" describes proper structure: weight sunk, root established, center of gravity low. "Move in timely fashion" is perhaps the most crucial martial principle: technique executed too early or too late fails, while the same technique at the right moment succeeds effortlessly. The fighter who contends—who pushes against resistance, who forces techniques, who fights the opponent's strength rather than flowing around it—exhausts himself and creates openings. The fighter who flows is beyond reproach because there is nothing to grab, nothing to oppose.



Key Characters

善 (*shàn*)

Good, excellent — appears seven times, revealing seven dimensions of water-like excellence

...

水 (*shuǐ*)

Water — the supreme metaphor for Tao in action; yields yet overcomes all

...

利 (*lì*)

Benefit — what water does without intention; the natural gift of non-contending

...

爭 (*zhēng*)

Contend — the opposite of water's way; the source of exhaustion and reproach

...

惡 (*è*)

Despise — what others feel toward the low places water seeks; conventional blindness

...

淵 (*yuān*)

Deep, abyss — the quality of mind; unfathomable stillness containing inexhaustible wisdom

...

時 (*shí*)

Timely — the crucial quality of action; water moves when conditions are right

...

尤 (*yóu*)

Reproach, fault — what the non-contending sage escapes; the consequence of forcing



Cross-References

This chapter resonates with:

- **Chapter 22** — "Yielding overcomes" — water as the model for the yielding principle
- **Chapter 43** — "The soft overcomes the hard" — water's patient wearing action
- **Chapter 66** — "Hundred valleys king" — ruling through lowliness, like water
- **Chapter 78** — "Nothing overcomes water" — the explicit statement of water's unconquerable nature

Water does not try to flow downhill. It simply flows, and downhill is where flowing leads.



CHAPTER 42

The Tao Gives Birth to One



Original Chinese Text

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。人之所惡，唯孤、寡、不穀，而王公以為稱。故物或損之而益，或益之而損。人之所教，我亦教之。強梁者不得其死，吾將以為教父。



Poetic Taoist Translation

The Tao gives birth to One.

One gives birth to Two.

Two gives birth to Three.

Three gives birth to the ten thousand things.

The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs

*and embrace yang in their arms,
blending these breaths into harmony.*

*What people detest—
being orphaned, alone, unworthy—
yet kings and lords call themselves by these names.*

*Thus things may decrease and thereby increase,
or increase and thereby decrease.*

*What others have taught, I also teach:
The violent do not die natural deaths.
I shall take this as the father of my teaching.*



Taoist Alchemy & Meditation Commentary

This is a cosmological cornerstone of the Tao Te Ching. In four phrases, Laozi describes the emergence of everything from nothing. "The Tao gives birth to One"—yi (一) emerges from the Tao, the first differentiation from undifferentiated source. This One is the primal unity, the Tai Yi (太一), the supreme unity before any division. "One gives birth to Two"—yin and yang emerge from unity, the fundamental polarity that makes all existence possible. "Two gives birth to Three"—the interaction of yin and yang produces the third, the dynamic principle that allows continuous creation. "Three gives birth to the ten thousand things"—from this triad, everything arises.

"The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang in their arms"—fu yin er bao yang (負陰而抱陽). Every existing thing contains both yin and yang; nothing is purely one or the other. The interplay between them is not conflict but embrace; they hold each other in dynamic balance. "Blending these breaths into harmony"—chong qi yi wei he (沖氣以為和). Chong (沖) is the empty, the void, the space between; qi (氣) is breath, energy, vital force; he (和) is harmony. The harmony of existence arises from the emptiness that allows the two breaths to blend.

"What people detest—being orphaned, alone, unworthy—yet kings and lords call themselves by these names"—gu (孤), gua (寡), bu gu (不穀) are self-deprecating titles used by Chinese rulers. Whether sincere or merely formal, these titles acknowledge a truth: the ruler depends on what is ruled; the high cannot exist without the low. "Things may decrease and thereby increase, or increase and thereby decrease"—this is the paradox at the heart of cultivation. What seems like loss may lead to gain; what seems like gain may lead to loss. The practitioner who empties becomes full; the practitioner who grasps remains empty.

"The violent do not die natural deaths"—qiang liang zhe bu de qi si (強梁者不得其死). Qiang liang means strong, forceful, violent—those who use force against the natural order. This is the "father" of the teaching: that force defeats itself. The Tao works through yielding, softness, apparent weakness. Those who oppose this principle may achieve temporary success but ultimately fail.

Four Perspectives

Wang Bi (王弼) Philosophical Perspective

Wang Bi reads this verse as the fundamental statement of Taoist cosmology. "The Tao gives birth to One"—Wang Bi would emphasize that this is not temporal sequence but logical priority. The Tao does not first exist and then produce the One; rather, the One is the Tao in its first manifestation, the first distinction within undifferentiated source. The progression to Two, Three, and the ten thousand things follows the same logic: each stage emerges from the previous not through passage of time but through increasing differentiation. "Things may decrease and thereby increase"—Wang Bi interprets this as describing the paradox of effective governance. The ruler who diminishes himself increases his effectiveness; the ruler who aggrandizes himself decreases his influence. This is not merely strategic advice but description of reality: the Tao works through apparent opposites. "The violent do not die natural deaths"—Wang Bi would see this as the inevitable consequence of opposing the Tao's nature. Force is ultimately self-defeating.

Heshang Gong (河上公) Cultivation Perspective

Heshang Gong reads the cosmological sequence as describing internal alchemy. "The Tao gives birth to One"—in the body, this is yuan qi (元氣), the original breath, the primordial energy that existed before differentiation. "One gives birth to Two"—this is the separation into yin and yang within the body, the polarity that makes energy circulation possible. "Two gives birth to Three"—this is the interaction that produces jing (精), qi (氣), and shen (神)—essence, energy, and spirit—the three treasures of internal alchemy. "Blending these breaths into harmony"—Heshang Gong applies this directly to practice. The cultivator harmonizes yin and yang within the body through breathing, through posture, through mental cultivation. The goal is not to eliminate one or enhance the other but to allow them to blend, to circulate, to transform into each other naturally. "The violent do not die natural deaths"—in cultivation, this means that force destroys what it attempts to create. The practitioner who forces breath, forces energy, forces states—this practitioner harms rather than helps the process.

Bodhidharma / Chan (禪) Perspective

Chan finds in this verse the teaching of dependent origination expressed in Taoist terms. "The Tao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two..."—all phenomena arise through conditions, each depending on what came before. Nothing exists independently; everything is interconnected in a web of arising and passing away. "The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang"—Chan might read this as the non-duality at the heart of apparent duality. Yin and yang are not truly separate; they are two aspects of one reality, distinguishable but not divisible. "Things may decrease and thereby increase"—this is the teaching of emptiness. What is full of self is actually empty; what is empty of self is actually full. The practitioner who lets go of everything gains everything; the practitioner who grasps everything loses everything. "The violent do not die natural deaths"—Chan might interpret this as describing the fate of ego-driven action. The self that asserts itself most strongly is the self that suffers most; the self that yields completely discovers that there was never anything to yield.

Internal Martial Arts (內家拳) Perspective

The martial artist reads this verse as describing the fundamental principle of internal arts. "The Tao gives birth to One"—in combat, this is the unity of intention and action, the moment before movement separates into technique. "One gives birth to Two"—this is the polarity of yin and yang that allows all martial movement: advance and retreat, expansion and contraction, substantial and insubstantial. "Two gives birth to Three"—this is the dynamic interplay that produces actual technique, the third element that emerges from the interaction of the two. "Blending these breaths into harmony"—this is the goal of mature practice in any tradition. The practitioner learns to blend hard and soft, fast and slow, full and empty, until they are not opposites but aspects of unified movement. "The violent do not die natural deaths"—this is the lesson every tradition teaches its advanced students. Force meets force and both are damaged. The practitioner who has understood the Tao never opposes force directly but

yields, redirects, uses the opponent's energy against itself. Softness ultimately prevails. But it is the cosmological sequence that reveals the deepest martial truth: unity before division. "The Tao gives birth to One"—every effective fighter has found their "one," the single root principle from which all technique emerges. For the wrestler, it is hip position—every throw, every sweep, every sprawl begins and ends with the relationship between hips and ground. For the striker, it is connection to the earth—every punch, every kick, every elbow generates power not from the limb that strikes but from the ground that supports. The practitioner who has found this one does not need ten thousand techniques; the ten thousand techniques are already present in the one, the way all branches are present in the root. The fighter who has not found the one accumulates techniques endlessly, stacking movement on movement, yet remains fragmented. The fighter who has found it moves from a single center, and every response is a variation of the same fundamental unity.



Key Characters

道 (*dào*)

The Tao — source of all existence

...

一 (*yī*)

One — the first differentiation, primal unity

...

二 (*èr*)

Two — yin and yang, fundamental polarity

...

三 (*sān*)

Three — dynamic interaction producing creation

...

萬物 (*wàn wù*)

Ten thousand things — all phenomena

...

陰 (*yīn*)

Yin — receptive, dark, yielding aspect

...

陽 (*yáng*)

Yang — active, bright, initiating aspect

...

冲氣 (*chōng qì*)

Empty breath — the harmony between polarities

...

強梁 (qiáng liáng)

Violent, forceful — those who oppose the Tao's way



Cross-References

This chapter resonates with:

- **Chapter 1** — "The Tao that can be spoken" — the source before names
 - **Chapter 14** — "Look, it cannot be seen" — the formless One
- **Chapter 25** — "There was something formless" — the Tao before creation
 - **Chapter 40** — "Being is born of non-being" — the same cosmology

From nothing, one. From one, two. From two, three. From three, everything. In everything, the return to nothing.

TAO TE CHING

道



Discovering the Deeper Aspects
of the Tao

A Character-by-Character Translation
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