

# **The Dowdy King**

- An alternative translation of "Tao Te Ching", Lao Zi's Taoist classic

Translated by  
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*The Dowdy King: An Alternative Translation of "Tao Te Ching",  
Lao Zi's Taoist Classic*

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*To Michele, Anais and Pria.*

## **TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION**

*So here it is! What's done is done!  
I hope you like this book.  
I beg you, if you still have doubts:  
Please take a deeper look.*

*The process has been scholarly  
and that I'll guarantee.  
Even Lao Zi would enjoy it  
if with us he could be.*

*You will read it for its rhythm  
and you will like its rhyme.  
Both young and old can now enjoy  
this book that has no time.*

*As you read on, line after line,  
you will start to see how,  
your way of living can change with  
a sense of what is Dao.*

*The way's clear! The book has seen  
the brilliant light of day.  
Among its readers there may be  
a critic who will say:*

*"It's not just another version  
of well-known Dao De Jing.  
Of the several translations,  
it is The Dowdy King!"*

## **BOOK ONE**

1.

Alas this very spoken Dao  
is not the constant one.  
So find a name for name and you  
have nothing but a pun.

The nameless was the source that made  
the planet and its sky.  
The named one is all creatures' mom  
and maybe this is why.

The mystery of the Dao is felt  
through nothing - that's the key.  
Its limits manifest themselves  
in everything we see.

Now both of these share ancestors  
though they share names no more.  
A mystery within mystery  
and every mystery's door.

2.

Beauty is recognized by all  
because the ugly's there.  
The good is seen as good because  
with bad we can compare.

Something gives birth to Nothing and  
vice-versa's also true.  
The easy and the difficult -  
they need each other too.

To demonstrate a contrast well,  
how about short and tall?  
High and low include each other,  
prevent each other's fall.

A singer's voice in harmony  
with noises all around;  
Though front and back are opposites  
they are together bound.

The wise man teaches without words.  
There's nothing he must do.  
Ten thousand creatures rise and fall.  
Where is the credit due?

Creation without possession -  
when its task is complete,  
no thanks are expected, no praise  
for this eternal feat.

3.

If honor's not bestowed on men,  
there'll be no arguments.  
Discard the rare and you won't see  
criminal elements.

The desired should not be shown  
and minds won't be confused.  
The sage's way of government  
just cannot be refused.

For he empties all the people's minds  
and fills all their tummies.  
Knowledge is not widespread and the  
clever ones are dummies.

Ambition's weak but bones are strong,  
and if nothing is done,  
everything is at as it should be  
and nothing's left undone.

4.

The Dao is empty; though it's used  
forever it will last.  
From its depth, for every creature  
an origin was cast.

Dull its edges, undo its knot  
and soften its bright glare.  
It's reunited with its dust.  
It's present everywhere.

It seems to hide in mystery.  
I do not know its source.  
It seems to be the ancestor  
of all imperial force.

5.

The sky and earth are cruel,  
view all as dogs of straw.  
The sage is cruel; for him too  
all folks are dogs of straw.

Between sky and earth a bellows -  
interminable void.  
Once the bellow's set in motion,  
a rest-state it'll avoid.

The greater number of commands  
will quickly dissipate.  
So I keep to the middle way -  
to it I gravitate.

6.

The valley spirit never dies -  
mysterious female birth.  
The gateway of this woman is  
the root of sky and earth.

Though one can hardly see this root  
it seems it's always there.  
Although it is used constantly  
there's root enough to spare.

7.

Sky and earth are everlasting  
and I can tell you why:  
Since sky and earth are never born,  
how can they ever die?

Although the sage keeps himself back,  
he is truly foremost.  
Although he keeps himself aloof,  
he is one with the host.

And just because this wise man has  
no selfish thought or deed,  
it can be said with certainty:  
he will always succeed.

8.

The greatest good is like water -  
a life to all it brings.  
Without struggle it fills places  
unliked by man and things.

In this way it resembles Dao.  
For home choose well the land.  
In thought maintain a constant calm  
and give neighbors a hand.

Your words should always ring of truth  
and justly you must rule.  
At work attempt to give your best.  
In acting keep your cool.

And if you never, ever play  
the awful fighting game,  
there definitely is no way  
you'll ever get the blame.

9.

It is good to know when to stop.  
Never pour to the brim.  
An over-sharpened blade won't last.  
A rich home's fate is grim.

If you seek high titles and wealth,  
you're in trouble, and how!  
Retire when your job is done.  
That is the way of Dao.

10.

Body and soul are firmly bound  
till death unties their knot.  
With exercise of *Qi*\* can you  
become a supple tot?

Polish the mirror. Do your best!  
You'll see it's not first-rate.  
With inaction can love be shown?  
Can one govern a state?

When heaven's gates open and shut,  
can female role be kept?  
If you know the four directions,  
can you be so inept?

Though they're not hers, she cares for them,  
even when they're full grown.  
She does not need to dominate -  
As Virtue this is known

[\*Qi: life force or vital energy in Chinese medicine/philosophy]

11.

Thirty straight spokes make up a hub.  
An empty space they seal.  
It is the Nothing in between  
that makes a useful wheel.

In pottery we knead the clay  
until we're quite fed up.  
Again the empty space inside  
gives us a useful cup.

Saw off a door, a window too.  
Sweep the dust with your broom.  
The Nothing in the box provides  
a useful, spacious room.

Although we like to gain some thing,  
this fact we cannot hide:  
It's not the thing itself we use;  
it's the Nothing inside.

12.

Just as five notes and five colors  
make people deaf or blind,  
the five tastes ruin that sense too  
and hunting kills the mind.

Progress is halted by rare goods  
and that is why the sage  
supports the stomach, not the eye.  
His wisdom knows no age.

13.

People are completely unnerved  
if honored or disgraced.  
A high rank, just like the body,  
is by troubles embraced.

When honor's bestowed on a man,  
it can cause quite a shock.  
It's certain eventual disgrace  
would hit him like a rock.

When the human body is gone,  
all troubles retire.  
Love your body - you'll be trusted  
with any empire.

14.

Observe it without seeing it -  
It is invisible.  
Hold out your hand, try to touch it -  
It is intangible.

The ears cannot make it out.  
It is so rarified.  
These three features are so alike,  
they have been unified.

From above it is not brilliant.  
Its underside's not dark.  
To nothing it returns, unseen.  
To name it there's no mark.

Welcome it. You won't see its head -  
mysterious ancient way.  
Follow it. Can you see its tail?  
What's real in today?

If you can know the origin  
of ancient history,  
then you will feel the essence of  
the Daoist mystery.

15.

The ancient well versed in the Dao  
is subtle and profound.  
Mysteriously he understands  
the world and what's around.

With all the above qualities,  
he is a well-closed book.  
It is hard to get to know him.  
He has a unique look:

Tentative - like someone crossing  
a frozen, winter stream.  
Hesitant - as though he's aware  
of neighbor's high esteem.

As formal as a guest he is.  
He yields like melting ice.  
He's like a block of uncarved wood,  
so simple yet so nice.

He's as empty as the valleys.  
Like murky muddy ponds,  
he calmly gains his clarity.  
To movement he responds.

Whoever abides by the way  
does not wish to be full.  
Though he's not filled, he is renewed  
despite his aging's pull.

16.

In silence I empty myself -  
a valid way to learn.  
Ten thousand beings rise and fall  
and I watch their return.

They grow and return silently  
to roots and to their fate.  
When constant wisdom is unknown,  
disaster will not wait.

The tolerant knows the constant,  
can take the royal vow.  
Kingly actions lead to heaven  
and heaven leads to Dao.

So onward to eternity ...  
Until this body's dead,  
no dangers will be encountered.  
There'll be no use for red.

17.

There are many kinds of sultans -  
a mixed royal parade.  
They have various ways of ruling.  
Let's give them all a grade:

The best ruler goes unnoticed.  
The next is loved and praised.  
The third ruler scares his subjects.  
The last's name is debased.

Whenever faith is not enough,  
one has to compensate.  
For with a lack of faith you'll have  
a growing wave of hate.

He hesitantly weighs his words.  
His method's great, you know.  
The people will tell anyone,  
"It's naturally so."

18.

When the great Dao is abandoned,  
kindness, morals appear.  
Great hypocrisy will emerge  
when cleverness is here.

With turmoil in the family  
the filial child is there.  
There will be loyal ministers  
in times of state despair.

19.

Discard the clever and the wise  
and, yes, when all is told,  
the lives of people will improve  
at least a hundred-fold.

Discard kindness and morals too  
and people will go back  
to filial love of their elders.  
That's surely the right track.

Discard novelties and profit  
and there'll be thieves no more.  
All gangs of bandits will disband.  
They'll put an end to war.

These three sets are decorations  
and they are not enough.  
Other attractions there must be,  
or else the going's rough.

Exhibit fine simplicity,  
embrace the uncarved block.  
Don't think too much about yourself,  
and all desires mock.

20.

Stop the learning and don't worry.  
What's between no and yes?  
Are good and evil different?  
Your fears are worth less?

What expanse of endless spirit!  
The festive offering  
is enjoyed by the people on  
a terrace in the spring.

Quiet and without expression,  
only I am alone.  
As a babe still to learn smiling,  
tired, and with no home.

The people have more than enough -  
my condition's lousy.  
Vulgar people have clear minds -  
only I am drowsy.

Most seem to know what's going on -  
How confused I can be!  
I'm like an ever-blowing wind,  
as calm as any sea.

Other people have direction.  
I'm very strange and dumb.  
I'm different from everyone,  
love to be fed by Mom.

21.

If you would only follow Dao,  
your virtue would be great.  
Within Dao there is an image  
in shadow's hazy state.

Dao is shadowy and hazy.  
Within it there is form.  
In its darkness a true life-force -  
observed and tested norm.

So to most ancient times look back.  
You'll always find its name.  
Through the Dao I see creation,  
guarantor of its fame.