

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.1

### *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Wing-tsit Chan

#### ONE

*Feng*: The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.  
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.  
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;  
    this appears as darkness.  
The gate to all mystery.

*Chan*: The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;  
The Named is the mother of all things.  
Therefore let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety,  
And let there always be being so we may see their outcome.  
The two are the same,  
But after they are produced, they have different names.  
They both may be called deep and profound (*hsüan*).  
Deeper and more profound,  
The door of all subtleties!

#### TWO

*Feng*: Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.  
All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.  
Difficult and easy complement each other.  
Long and short contrast each other;  
High and low rest upon each other;  
Voice and sound harmonize each other;  
Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing (*wu-wei*), teaching no-talking.  
 The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,  
 Creating, yet not possessing,  
 Working, yet not taking credit.  
 Work is done, then forgotten.  
 Therefore it lasts forever.

*Chan*: When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,  
 There arises the recognition of ugliness.  
 When they all know the good as good,  
 There arises the recognition of evil.  
 Therefore:  
 Being and non-being produce each other;  
 Difficult and easy complete each other;  
 Long and short contrast each other;  
 High and low distinguish each other;  
 Sound and voice harmonize with each other;  
 Front and back follow each other.  
 Therefore the sage manages affairs without action (*wu-wei*)  
 And spreads doctrines without words.  
 All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.  
 He produces them, but does not take possession of them.  
 He acts, but does not rely on his own ability.  
 He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it.  
 It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his  
 accomplishment remains with him.

### THREE

*Feng*: Not exalting the gifted prevents quarreling.  
 Not collecting treasures prevents stealing.  
 Not seeing desirable things prevents confusion of the heart.  
 The wise therefore rule by emptying hearts and stuffing bellies,  
     by weakening ambitions and strengthening bones.  
 If people lack knowledge and desire,  
     then intellectuals will not try to interfere.  
 If nothing is done, then all will be well.

*Chan*: Do not exalt the worthy, so that the people shall not compete.  
 Do not value rare treasures, so that the people shall not steal.  
 Do not display objects of desire, so that the people's hearts  
     shall not be disturbed.  
 Therefore in the government of the sage,  
 He keeps their hearts vacuous (*hsü*),  
 Fills their bellies,  
 Weakens their ambitions,

And strengthens their bones,  
 He always causes his people to be without knowledge (cunning)  
 or desire,  
 And the crafty to be afraid to act.  
 By acting without action, all things will be in order.

#### FOUR

*Feng:* The Tao is an empty vessel; it is used, but never filled.  
 Oh, unfathomable source of ten thousand things!  
 Blunt the sharpness,  
 Untangle the knot,  
 Soften the glare,  
 Merge with dust.  
 Oh, hidden deep but ever present!  
 I do not know from whence it comes.  
 It is the forefather of the emperors.

*Chan:* Tao is empty (like a bowl),  
 It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted.  
 It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things.  
 It blunts its sharpness,  
 It unties its tangles.  
 It softens its light.  
 It becomes one with the dusty world.  
 Deep and still, it appears to exist forever.  
 I do not know whose son it is.  
 It seems to have existed before the Lord.

#### FIVE

*Feng:* Heaven and earth are ruthless;  
 They see the ten thousand things as dummies.  
 The wise are ruthless;  
 They see people as dummies.

The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.  
 The shape changes but not the form;  
 The more it moves, the more it yields.  
 More words count less.  
 Hold fast to the center.

*Chan:* Heaven and Earth are not humane (*jen*).  
 They regard all things as straw dogs.  
 The sage is not humane.  
 He regards all people as straw dogs.

How Heaven and Earth are like a bellows!  
While vacuous, it is never exhausted.  
When active, it produces even more.  
Much talk will of course come to a dead end.  
It is better to keep to the center (*chung*).

## SIX

*Feng*: The valley spirit never dies;  
It is the woman, primal mother.  
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.  
It is like a veil barely seen.  
Use it; it will never fail.

*Chan*: The spirit of the valley never dies.  
It is called the subtle and profound female.  
The gate of the subtle and profound female  
Is the root of Heaven and Earth.  
It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.  
Use it and you will never wear it out.

## SEVEN

*Feng*: Heaven and earth last forever.  
Why do heaven and earth last forever?  
They are unborn,  
So ever living.  
The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead.  
He is detached, thus at one with all.  
Through selfless action, he attains fulfillment.

*Chan*: Heaven is eternal and Earth everlasting.  
They can be eternal and everlasting because they  
do not exist for themselves,  
And for this reason can exist forever.  
Therefore the sage places himself in the background,  
but finds himself in the foreground.  
He puts himself away, and yet he always remains.  
Is it not because he has no personal interests?  
This is the reason why his personal interests are fulfilled.

## EIGHT

*Feng*: The highest good is like water.  
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.  
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

In dwelling, be close to the land.  
 In meditation, go deep in the heart.  
 In dealing with others, be gentle and kind.  
 In speech, be true.  
 In ruling, be just.  
 In business, be competent.  
 In action, watch the timing.

No fight: No blame.

*Chan:* The best (man) is like water.  
 Water is good; it benefits all things and does not  
     compete with them.  
 It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.  
 This is why it is so near to Tao.  
 [The best man] in his dwelling loves the earth.  
 In his heart, he loves what is profound.  
 In his associations, he loves humanity.  
 In his words, he loves faithfulness.  
 In government, he loves order.  
 In handling affairs, he loves competence.  
 In his activities, he loves timeliness.  
 It is because he does not compete that he is  
     without reproach.

## NINE

*Feng:* Better stop short than fill to the brim.  
 Oversharpen the blade, and the edge will soon blunt.  
 Amass a store of gold and jade, and no one can protect it.  
 Claim wealth and titles, and disaster will follow.  
 Retire when the work is done.  
 This is the way of heaven.

*Chan:* To hold and fill to overflowing  
     Is not as good as to stop in time.  
 Sharpen a sword-edge to its very sharpest,  
     And the (edge) will not last long.  
 When gold and jade fill your hall,  
     You will not be able to keep them.  
 To be proud with honor and wealth  
     Is to cause one's own downfall.  
 Withdraw as soon as your work is done.  
 Such is Heaven's Way.

## TEN

*Feng:* Carrying body and soul and embracing the one,  
 Can you avoid separation?  
 Attending fully and becoming supple,  
 Can you be as a newborn babe?  
 Washing and cleansing the primal vision,  
 Can you be without stain?  
 Loving all men and ruling the country,  
 Can you be without cleverness?  
 Opening and closing the gates of heaven,  
 Can you play the role of woman?  
 Understanding and being open to all things,  
 Are you able to do nothing?  
 Giving birth and nourishing,  
 Bearing yet not possessing,  
 Working yet not taking credit,  
 Leading yet not dominating,  
 This is the Primal Virtue.

*Chan:* Can you keep the spirit and embrace the One without departing  
 from them?  
 Can you concentrate your vital force (*ch'i*) and achieve the highest  
 degree of weakness like an infant?  
 Can you clean and purify your profound insight so it will be  
 spotless?  
 Can you love the people and govern the state without knowledge  
 (cunning)?  
 Can you play the role of the female in the opening and closing  
 of the gates of Heaven?  
 Can you understand all and penetrate all without  
 taking any action?  
 To produce things and to rear them,  
 To produce, but not to take possession of them,  
 To act, but not to rely on one's own ability,  
 To lead them, but not to master them—  
 This is called profound and secret virtue (*hsüan-te*).

## ELEVEN

*Feng:* Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
 It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
 Shape clay into a vessel;  
 It is the space within that makes it useful.  
 Cut doors and windows for a room;  
 It is the holes which make it useful.

Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.

*Chan:* Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.  
Clay is molded to form a utensil,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.  
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,  
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.  
Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility.

## TWELVE

*Feng:* The five colors blind the eye.  
The five tones deafen the ear.  
The five flavors dull the taste.  
Racing and hunting madden the mind.  
Precious things lead one astray.

Therefore the sage is guided by what he feels and not by what he sees.  
He lets go of that and chooses this.

*Chan:* The five colors cause one's eyes to be blind.  
The five tones cause one's ears to be deaf.  
The five flavors cause one's palate to be spoiled.  
Racing and hunting cause one's mind to be mad.  
Goods that are hard to get injure one's activities.  
For this reason the sage is concerned with the belly  
and not the eyes,  
Therefore he rejects the one but accepts the other.

## THIRTEEN

*Feng:* Accept disgrace willingly.  
Accept misfortune as the human condition.

What do you mean by “Accept disgrace willingly”?  
Accept being unimportant.  
Do not be concerned with loss or gain.  
This is called “accepting disgrace willingly.”

What do you mean by “Accept misfortune as the human condition”?  
Misfortune comes from having a body.  
Without a body, how could there be misfortune?

Surrender yourself humbly; then you can be trusted to care for all things.

Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things.

*Chan:* Be apprehensive when receiving favor or disgrace.

Regard great trouble as seriously as you regard your body.

What is meant by being apprehensive when receiving  
favor or disgrace?

Favor is considered inferior.

Be apprehensive when you receive them and also be  
apprehensive when you lose them.

This is what is meant by being apprehensive when receiving  
favor or disgrace.

What does it mean to regard great trouble as seriously as  
you regard the body?

The reason why I have great trouble is that I have a body  
(and am attached to it).

If I have no body,

What trouble could I have?

Therefore he who values the world as his body may be entrusted with  
the empire.

He who loves the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire.

#### FOURTEEN

*Feng:* Look, it cannot be seen - it is beyond form.

Listen, it cannot be heard - it is beyond sound.

Grasp, it cannot be held - it is intangible.

These three are indefinable;

Therefore they are joined in one.

From above it is not bright;

From below it is not dark:

An unbroken thread beyond description.

It returns to nothingness. The form of the formless,

The image of the imageless,

It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.

Stand before it and there is no beginning.

Follow it and there is no end.

Stay with the ancient Tao,

Move with the present.

Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao.

*Chan:* We look at it and do not see it;

Its name is The Invisible.

We listen to it and do not hear it;



Its name is The Inaudible.  
We touch it and do not find it;  
Its name is The Subtle (formless).  
These three cannot be further inquired into,  
And hence merge into one.  
Going up high, it is not bright, and coming down low,  
it is not dark.  
Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name;  
It reverts to nothingness.  
This is called shape without shape,  
Form (*hsiang*) without object.  
It is The Vague and Elusive.  
Meet it and you will not see its head.  
Follow it and you will not see its back.  
Hold on to the Tao of old in order to master the things of  
the present.  
From this one may know the primeval beginning  
[of the universe].  
This is called the bond of Tao.