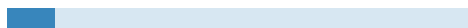




An Intuitive Self Publication




The Tao of Managing



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People Who Have Helped

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Barbara Cilik

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Bill Hammond

Elda Hartley

Ned Herrmann

Mike Hunter

Lynda Johnson

Carl Jung

Tommie Kushner

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Sid Parnes

Robert Pirsig

George Prince

Bob Samples

Chrys Schoonover


Val Silbey

Dorothy Sisk

Helena Steer

Helena Toner

And all our other “teachers” both known and unknown.



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Prologue

What This Book Is About

“My aim became to leave things to chance.”

Carl Jung

The *Tao of Managing* takes ideas from the ancient Chinese classic, the *Tao Te Ching* and applies them to a modern business context. The ideas unfold in a dialogue between two men: George, who has learned from the insights of the Tao, and Michael, who is intrigued but skeptical about these strange, paradoxical truths. Their conversations are modeled after the age-old mentor and disciple relationship which characterizes the important teaching stories of both Eastern and Western traditions.

Jung’s paradoxical statement about leaving things to chance captures the essence of the *Tao Te Ching*. During a difficult period in his life, Jung had misgivings about his career, family, and life in general. He ultimately decided that it was best to stop meddling in his experience so that the natural course of events could take over. Like so many others through the centuries, Jung found solace in the words of Lao Tsu, who wrote the *Tao Te Ching* 2500 years ago.

No other book except the *Bible* has been translated into English as often as the *Tao Te Ching*. Yet this treasure of Chinese philosophy is little known to the general public in the Western world, much less to students and practitioners of management. But a receptive reading of this short and interesting book can prove as relevant and fresh today as it must have been over two thousand years ago. To make the material accessible to the hurried executive, business student, or admirer of Eastern ways, the *Tao of Managing* sets the ideas in the context of the modern business world.

The Meeting of East and West

In recent years, traces of Eastern thinking have reached Western managers in the form of theories about Japanese management. Confronted with the success of Japanese industry, scholars tried to explain it with theories emphasizing the cultural context of Japanese thought. Japanese workers and managers perceive greater interdependence and less individuality. They understand ambiguity and paradox, and they are not disturbed by imperfection except in their quality control.

Our goal is not to tout Eastern practices as better than American. But we need to balance our rationality, and some reflection on the *Tao Te Ching* will help. We do not expect American managers to become Taoists. But there are situations where all managers would be better off by setting aside their “hard-headed rationality” for a few moments. This preoccupation of the typical manager, according to *In Search of Excellence* authors Peters and Waterman, “is right enough to be dangerously wrong, and it has arguably led us seriously astray.”

Still, the thought of “leaving things to chance” may seem antithetical to modern management interests. Managing, to many, means doing things: acting, altering course, and even meddling. Much of the time this is exactly what is needed. But managers committed to active change are apt to overlook an equally effective strategy – doing nothing! But the kind of “doing nothing” this book deals with calls for a heightened awareness of what we are not doing. As Michael is told by George, doing nothing means *doing nothing*. And that is not easy.

Balancing Action and Non Action

What is really needed is a sense of balance. Balance between opportunism and procrastination, between action and non action, between will and chance. The *Tao Te Ching* conveys this balance by telling about the natural harmony between Yang (the initiating and creative force) and Yin (Yang's receptive complement). By understanding these two principles and aligning ourselves with them, we become whole. But this means giving up some control and sometimes setting our will aside.

Jung said, "Will is a demonstration of power over fate, i.e., the exclusion of chance." Will has produced our Western civilization through the rational, purposeful sublimation of nature. In the process, we have neglected the "power" of chance and paid the price for our neglect. Many of our problems of health, pollution, urban crowding, inflation, and poverty are caused by our interventions in the natural order. The *Tao of Managing* suggests we need a more balanced style.

As Michael learns in our story, achieving balance is not easy, although it sounds like it might be. After overcoming his initial misunderstanding and skepticism, he develops a theoretical respect for the Tao. But Michael discovers that adopting a "not-doing" attitude is the most challenging thing he has every tried to accomplish. Nevertheless, the message is so clear, so simple in a way, and so very important: balance and harmony. To live one's life or manage one's company out of balance is not to know the meaning of wholeness, completion, or, ultimately, success.

What's In a Name

The Epilogue contains information about the history of the *Tao Te Ching*, its mysterious author Lao Tsu, and the political context which spawned his philosophy. Understanding the historical debates over Lao Tsu's identity and the origin of the *Tao Te Ching* adds a perspective to all modern applications of Taoist philosophy. But an intellectual knowledge is not necessary to appreciate the clear and simple message. Nonetheless, it is helpful to know a few things about the *Tao Te Ching* before reading on – like how to pronounce it and what it means.

Tao is pronounced as "dow" in dowel with an explosive "d." The second word, Te, should be said like "dir" in dirty but without the explosive "d." Ching should be pronounced as "jing" in jingo with a slight emphasis on the first letter. We have phonetically: Dow Dir Jing as a rough approximation. A knowledgeable person will know what we mean when we pronounce it this way even though that is not quite how it would come out in Chinese.

Pronunciation is one thing, meaning quite another. The most frequently used meaning for Tao is "way." Tao is the single most significant concept in Chinese philosophy. For Te, most scholars use the term "power," but it is translated alternately as "virtue." In Chinese philosophy, power and virtue are closely related ideas. Finally, Ching simply means "book" or "classic." Putting this together we get "The Classic of the Way and the Power" or "The Book about the Power of the Way."

The Worthy Old One – Lao Tzu

The reputed author of the *Tao Te Ching* is Lao Tsu. His name can be pronounced "lou" as in louse for Lao, and an explosive "ts" as in nuts for Tsu. We should not draw the conclusion from this that the author was a lousy nut. In fact, Lao means "old," or

“venerable” and Tsu is a commonly used title of respect like Sir but with more veneration such as “worthy one.” We can say the Worthy Old One. This does not identify a unique individual since China is noted for “worthy old ones.”

As legend has it, Lao Tsu became discouraged with the decadence of his times (6th century, BC) and decided to abandon his responsibilities and journey to a remote mountain area beyond the Western border of China. When he arrived at the border, he encountered a royal guard who was puzzled by this man of obvious dignity and position traveling into the mountains. The border guard sensed his role in an important event and asked Lao Tsu to write a book that distilled his wisdom before he departed and his insights were lost forever.

Lao Tsu responded by setting down 5,000 Chinese characters that came to be known as the *Tao Te Ching*. In its present form, the book is composed of 81 chapters. Each chapter is very short, in English as few as four lines and no more than two dozen for the longest. The first forty chapters deal with principles of the Taoist philosophy and the remainder with the application of these ideas to human problems.

Embracing Paradox

A fundamental theme in Chinese philosophy is the study of how we can live together in harmony. The advice of the *Tao Te Ching* is no exception. It is a statement about our basic relationship with each other and with nature that holds true for all ages, not just sixth century BC China. The first step on the “way” to “power” is to harmonize with, not rebel against the basic laws of the universe.

To grasp this meaning, however, we must be prepared to deal with paradoxes. Paradox is the single most distinctive characteristic of the *Tao Te Ching*. Something is said, then often its opposite is stated as if to prove the first. For instance, the last line of the last chapter reads “The Tao of the sage is work without effort.” For the Western mind this is a contradiction in terms. Most of us believe that work is effort, so how is it possible to work without effort? Understanding these paradoxes is the key to unraveling the mystery of the *Tao Te Ching* and its meaning for modern management.

On encountering the *Tao Te Ching*, a typical first response is laughter at such preposterous statements. But out of the paradox, a new understanding of the relation between our inner and outer lives begins to emerge. The reconciliation of paradox represents the true mark of success in business, industry, government, indeed in all walks of life. As the inner meanings of the paradoxes sink in at an intuitive level, many feel this teaching is much needed for our society today. We believe this to be true. Now we will allow George and Michael to speak for us.

A Note on Quotations

The quotes are taken from the 1997 25th-Anniversary Edition of the *Tao Te Ching* translated by Gia-Fu Feng and illustrated by Jane English. For each quote, we indicate the chapter source in parentheses. All quotes are used with the permission of Vintage Books. To read each quote set in its larger context, we suggest you obtain a copy of the Feng and English version of the *Tao Te Ching*. Alan Watts said of this book, “No one has done better in conveying Lao Tsu’s simple and laconic style of writing.”

Episode One

The Sage Stays Behind

Michael meets George and encounters the wisdom of the East for the first time.

The task force meeting on product strategy has just ended, and Michael and George are moving toward the door of the conference room.

George: I liked what you said about forecasting models in there, Michael. I'm sorry we didn't get introduced personally before the meeting. My name is George.

Michael: OK Mr., uh, George. Call me Mike. I'm glad to know someone was listening. It's hard to make an impression when you're new and don't know where everybody's coming from. Let's see, you're here from Product Development, right?

George: That's right. And I liked your approach because it offers us some fresh strategies for anticipating the different product cycles. Most analysts just come in spouting numbers and don't see the big picture. You've got a nice perspective there.

Michael: Thanks. I appreciate it. It helps to be on top of the numbers, but I learned pretty quickly that nobody listens to you around here if you don't understand the business. It's part of my getting ahead strategy.

George: How long have you been at it?

Michael: Eleven months. I'm due to rotate into some project work next month, and I'm looking forward to it. Maybe I'll be doing some things for you.

George: That would be nice. We need some work on scheduling models.

Michael: I'd love to score points with that stuff because the whole division really turns on effective project management. I'm getting restless with the forecasting stuff already because there's more I want to do. You seem interested in moving ahead, but these other guys – I just don't know.

No offense, but Hirsch there is a real loser. He's not pulling his weight anymore, and it drives me nuts explaining to him that his old smoothing models are obsolete. I can't understand how guys like that hang on so long when they don't keep up. I mean, the guy actually refused to have a computer installed at his desk!

George: The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead. (7)

Michael: What?

George: The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead
 He is detached, thus at one with all. (7)

It's a line from the *Tao Te Ching*.

Michael: The what?

George: The *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tsu. It's a old book of Chinese philosophy that underlies Taoism. It's gained popularity in the west in recent years.

Michael: Never heard of it. What did you say about the sage? He falls behind? That's Hirsch all right.

George: Bob Hirsch is one of our more gifted managers, almost what I'd call a sage. His choice about computers doesn't diminish his basic managerial skills a bit. I just thought of the line when you said that Hirsch refused the computer, that's all. It's one of my favorite lines because in a lot of ways progress is an illusion.

Michael: You're serious? Look, off the record, the guy didn't know we had converted half our midrange projection programs for the desktops we got in last April. Smith's got 'em all set up and they're working, man. It's incredible that Hirsch survives without it. What's he supposed to use, a crystal ball?

George: He does a good, no, an excellent job at running his department, Maybe it's because he's not bent over the keyboard all day. You'd do well to get to know him a little better.

Michael: Hmm. That might be a little tough. You know that Hirsch meditates in the morning? I came in early once and he just about scared me to death. I thought he was dead.

George: Did he tell you about the meditation?

Michael: Sure, he said it helped him clear his mind for the day. More mental energy or something. It struck me as kind of weird, actually.

George: Nothing weird about meditation, Mike. Millions of people do it every day. I tried it myself but couldn't do it very well, so I stopped. I guess I respect Bob for having that level of mental discipline. Try to respect him yourself. There's a lot of talent there.

Michael: I'll try. Look, I've got to run now. There's a lunch meeting that Carlson and Dean set up. Can I tell them you suggested that I might be assigned to Product Development? I don't want to push, but you seem interested in my work. OK?

George: Sure. Tell them both I'd be glad to have you around for a while. But lighten up on Hirsch. That guy's got more respect around here than you or I may ever have.

Episode Two

The Way and It's Power

Michael Learns about the *Tao Te Ching*

- George Hello, Mike. Welcome to your first day in the division's nerve center. Plenty of excitement here. There are about 200 things to get done in six months, and something tells me that won't be enough for you.
- Michael Ha, just get me started.
- George Did you get your office set up?
- Michael No problems. It'll be nice to have a window for once.
- George Don't forget to use it – for looking, not jumping. By the way, did you get any new angles on Bob Hirsch before you left?
- Michael Funny you should ask. He took me out to lunch Wednesday to prepare me for coming over here. Nice guy. A little mellow maybe, but he was concerned about my progress and future. Maybe I misjudged him.
- George Bob's a manager, not a technician. He got the work done through you and the other people on his staff.
- Michael Right, and he was laid back about it. He never barreled in and told us what to do. But somehow we always knew what he expected of us.
- George Do you feel you got a lot done?
- Michael Sure. And I feel we were the ones to do it, not him. That's why I was coming down hard on him for not knowing some stuff. For a while, I thought we were carrying him.
- George And now?
- Michael Well, like you said, he's the manager.
- George When actions are performed
without unnecessary speech,
people say, "We did it." (17)
- Michael Huh?
- George That's another line from the *Tao Te Ching*.
- Michael Oh. Look, as long as I'm going to be here for a while, could you just answer one question? What is the dow day jing, and what's it got to do with management?
- George The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name. (1)
- Michael Now, I have no idea what that means.
- George I'm teasing you a little, Mike. Tao translates loosely into "the way" and it's spelled T-A-O but the T is pronounced very softly like a D.
- Michael Tao, as in Dow Jones.

George That's right.

Michael So, what is the book about? The chemical industry? Ha Ha. The Tao Chemical Corporation. Get it?

George That's good, Mike. In a way the *Tao Te Ching* is about the chemical industry, our industry, and everything else. In another way the book isn't about anything – it just is.

Michael Well can't you tell what it's about just by reading it?

George Yes and no. It depends on the reader's attitude and what he wants to learn. Your attitude or mood can make it nonsense or make it rich.

Michael Well, I assume you like it because you keep throwing out these little quotes all the time. What does it do for you?

George That's hard to say in words.

Michael How else might you say it?

George An understanding of the Tao comes gradually. It's not like a scheduling algorithm that's comprehensible just by studying the formulas and subroutines. It helps to play with the Tao before you understand it. Then you just might come to look at the world in a more holistic way.

Michael Holistic? You meant like a donut?

George Well, closer to donuts than anything I could say right now. I see that you enjoy playing with the words too. That's going to help if you really want to understand.

Michael OK. Tell me quickly how a diet of donuts can make me more holistic. Oh, and I like lifesavers too – and bagels!

George Then you're on your way. But a diet like that would cause some problems for your body. The Tao teaches harmony and balance.

Michael Balance of what?

George Opposites. It tells us to go with the flow.

Michael Opposites? Now you're talking conflict, not harmony.

George Not if you observe carefully. Look outside there. The wind and the tree aren't in conflict. See the way it just bends gracefully. Nature is full of harmony if you look for it. The *Tao Te Ching* uses a lot of natural metaphors.

Michael And man? Aren't we responsible for messing up that natural harmony? Are you going to tell me that we should return to a simpler, more natural state?

George Well, at this point a complete return might not be that harmonious. But think about your body, those trees out there, and the music you enjoy. They've all got rhythms and counterpoints. They all flow naturally. But, let's chat about these ideas another time. I'm due at a meeting in five minutes.

Episode Three

He Sees Without Looking

Michael “paradoxically” becomes a manager.

Michael The other day we were talking about natural rhythms as counterpoints. Does your book talk about counterpoints?

George Yes, let me get my favorite translation. Hmm, try these counterpoints:

Yield and overcome;
Bend and be straight;
Empty and be full;
Wear out and be new;
Have little and gain;
Have much and be confused. (22)

Michael Those are paradoxes. What’s the trick to them? I used to fool around with riddles all the time. See if you can figure out who “I” am in this one. “I’m not my sister and not my brother, but I am a child of my father and mother. Who am I?”

George You’re you, of course.

Michael No. I’m “I.” You see, I tricked you. What’s the trick to those Tao puzzles?

George No tricks, really. It reveals rather than conceals.

Michael Well, I disagree. What you read doesn’t reveal much at all. You present a paradox of opposites, and there’s no meaning in that. What if I said something like, “I can see better when I close my eyes.” There! What sense does that make?

George Are you sure you haven’t read this book before? That’s in here somewhere and yes, it does make sense.

Michael OK, explain.

George Don’t you ever get good ideas while you are asleep with your eyes closed? Don’t you see things with your mind’s eye?

Michael Sure, but they’re not real. If you want to see what’s there, you have to open your eyes, don’t you?

George I’m looking for your passage in the book. Here it is:

Without going outside,
you may know the whole world.
Without looking through the window,
you may see the ways of heaven.
The farther you go, the less you know.

Thus the sage knows without traveling;
He sees without looking;
He works without doing. (47)

See, Mike. You've got potential to be an Eastern sage. A mystic in a three piece suit.

Michael Ha Ha. Sounds like a pretty easy job – coming up with nonsense. Work without doing – come on! What kind of magic is that?

George It's not magic. It just is. And your skepticism helps it to be what it is.

The foolish student hears of the Tao and laughs aloud.
If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is. (41)

Michael Forgive my disrespect. But if there's something there that's useful, please tell me what it is. I don't think I'm cut out for this kind of knowing or whatever you call it.

George Let's call it awareness, but that's only a name. And I can't tell you what the Tao is. To me it's about living, and since managing is part of living, I see value in it. But I can't tell you what it is. In the words of Lao Tzu:

A description of the Tao
seems without substance or flavor.
It cannot be seen, it cannot be heard,
and yet it cannot be exhausted. (35)

Michael I really don't know what to think about that.

George Perhaps the key is not to think so much. Don't worry about it. Understanding Taoism isn't necessary around here. When you're ready for it, it will still be there. Right now I'd like to discuss your first assignment.

Michael Great.

George How'd you'd like to supervise a testing operation while we look for a replacement for McCormick? It would be good experience for you.

Michael You mean a management position? In testing? But I've never worked in testing.

George I know. But if you were a lab technician, you probably wouldn't be a good manager. It's temporary, and you can get the help you need from me or Rob Blaine.

I'll take you down this afternoon so you can meet everyone. You'll have a week to study the lab reports and the budget, and then I'll turn it over to you. Sound OK?

Michael Uh, great. Can't wait to get started. How many people are there in testing?

George In your unit there'll be eight, and we're looking for one more. They're pretty good people, Mike. I think you'll enjoy it and do a good job. I know it's a bit of a surprise, but I need you there more than I need another staff analyst right now.

Michael I'll see what I can do. Thanks for the opportunity.

Episode Four

High Winds and Heavy Rain

Michael discovers the principle of non action.

Michael has supervised the testing operation in Product Development for several weeks.

Michael Hi George, I was just thinking about you last night. There was a show on about Chinese art, something that I wouldn't usually watch, but your interest in the Tao made me take a look. It was quite interesting.

George In what way?

Michael Well, it's hard to say, but the Chinese seem to have a very simple conception: sparse content, muted colors, and things like that. Western art to me always seemed so rich and colorful, like each piece was created to say something really important.

George Perhaps the Chinese feel that simple is important.

Michael I guess you have a point there. Maybe that's the whole idea behind your book. You know, an ancient version of the KISS principle, keep it simple stupid! But, I still have trouble with that philosophy for management.

Things are too complex. If you've read Toffler's *Third Wave* or even *Future Shock*, you'd have a hard time accepting this Tao principle of going with the flow. Managers today really have to keep on top of things or else they just explode.

George I'm not sure what you mean. Can you give me an example?

Michael Sure. Just the other day Harry and three technicians came to me for more money to lease new test equipment for the KL-100 models. Joanne, one of the new women, heard about this equipment from a friend, and she insisted it was the greatest thing since sliced bread.

Reduced test timer reporting of electronic stress data, and a direct interface with our computers to store data for later study. I told her and Harry to hold off until we could be sure and that if we grabbed every new idea that came along, we'd waste more money than we save.

George How do you relate that to the Tao?

Michael Well, technology keeps changing so fast, and if you go with the flow, you lose control. Each incident like this requires a careful managerial assessment of costs and savings, as well as the technical features.

That doesn't mean we reject good ideas just because we're committed to a budget. But, it does mean staying on top of everything and actively managing each situation that comes along. To me the kind of non action that your book talks about would only lead to trouble. It just doesn't move fast enough for today's world.

George So you're concerned about rapid technological change and keeping pace with it.

Michael Exactly. But, I'm also concerned with costs and my budget.

George Sounds like balance and harmony to me.

Michael Well, I don't feel very harmonious at the moment. Harry can really give you a headache. It's tough keeping up with a guy like that. He's always pushing for new equipment.

George So you provide the counterpoint. In terms of the Tao:

Who can wait quietly while the mud settles?
 Who can remain still until the moment of action?
 Observers of the Tao do not seek fulfillment.
 Not seeking fulfillment, they are not
 swayed by desire for change. (15)

Michael But, we've got to change! What really gives me the headache is that Harry's right! Some of our test procedures are a joke. If you ask me, the company that doesn't "seek fulfillment" won't be around very long, and neither will managers who wait around for the mud to settle.

George That may or may not be. You just told me that you delayed Harry's request. Why?

Michael Well, I wanted all of us to have a little more time to assess the situation. You know, cost out the alternatives, evaluate the current testing program. That's only logical. Besides, I've got a neat project evaluation program that is just perfect for that sort of analysis. Why not try it out?

George You're beginning to impress me already as a follower of the Tao.

Michael Excuse me?

George You chose not to act on the equipment request to allow time for things to change on their own rather than intervene actively with a definite yes or no. Did you think of it that way?

Michael No, not really. I wanted time to do an evaluation, but you are right about not giving them a definite answer one way or the other. I can see that it did buy me some time. Hmm.

George Has Harry pressed you any more since he made the request?

Michael Well, actually I've been avoiding him. But, I saw Joanne in the cafeteria yesterday. She didn't mention a thing. I don't suppose she forgot, but maybe her initial enthusiasm has worn off a bit.

George High winds do not last all morning.
 Heavy rains do not last all day. (23)

Maybe the storm has blown over. Give the situation a chance to settle.

Episode Five

Force is Followed by Loss of Strength

Michael learns about achieving results without exercising power.

Michael Reflecting on the newest equipment situation the other day, I realized how my leadership style was involved. What does your Tao book say about leadership? I've read a lot about participation, and I know Japanese managers are participative. Is that where it all comes from?

George Here's one theme that applies:

He who does not trust enough will not be trusted. (17, 23)

And here's another:

A good soldier is not violent.

A good fighter is not angry.

A good winner is not vengeful.

A good employer is humble.

This is known as the Virtue of not striving.

This is known as ability to deal with people. (68)

Michael So you should be humble and trust your subordinates. That's consistent with a Theory Y approach. Anything on Theory X?

George Let's see:

When the country is ruled with a light hand,
the people are simple.

When the country is ruled with severity,
the people are cunning. (58)

Michael At least the advice is consistent. But I'm not convinced participation is always the right approach. Aren't there times when you should show a little strength? Some people will take advantage of you if you're soft. Isn't there anything in the Tao about power?

George Oh, absolutely. Power's not a new topic. Here, this is one of my favorite passages:

Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of the Tao,

Counsel him not to use force to conquer the universe.

For this would only cause resistance.

Thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed.

Lean years follow in the wake of a great war.

Just do what needs to be done.

Never take advantage of power. (30)

Michael That reminds me of the situation in Design Engineering where Don Shield came in and cleaned house. Talk about your thorn bushes! He could hardly get anything done for six months after sacking all the section heads. I think about 40% of the technical crew there left the company or transferred out. I don't know how things stand there now, but it sure was rough for a while.

George I think it's stabilized some, and the work's almost back on schedule.

Michael As bad as that was, though, it needed to be done. Guys like Shield don't have it easy coming into totally hopeless situations and trying to turn them around in a hurry. Business needs people like that who get off on power or else some shops would stagnate forever. Don't you agree?

George I can't argue with the results, but maybe Don's attitude might change. He does, as you say, "get off" on exercising power, and that hurts him as much as the actual decisions he makes. Here, this explains what I mean:

Achieve results, but never glory in them.
 Achieve results, but never boast.
 Achieve results, but never be proud.
 Achieve results, because this is the natural way.
 Achieve results, but not through violence.

Force is followed by loss of strength.
 This is not the way of the Tao.
 That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end. (30)

Michael Interesting. The iron hand and the velvet glove maybe. What's especially nice about that passage is that it does say "achieve results" five times! I was beginning to think that the Tao was an excuse for doing nothing. Ha ha. I can see it now: a new best seller: *The Tao Te Ching – How to Get Ahead by Doing Nothing!* That beats the one-minute manager by a full minute!

Episode Six

The Great Pretense Begins

Michael becomes aware of his “footnoted conversations.”

George Since our last chat you seem less skeptical of the *Tao Te Ching*. Are you?

Michael Well any book that anticipated management problems by that many centuries, and isn't even a book about management, can't be all bad.

George Do you think all books for managers should be about management?

Michael No. I guess managing is part of life, and you said before that the Tao was about living. It just seems that most of my reading lately has been about management.

You see, I want to know all I can because success is very important to me. I want to be recognized by those above me as competent, knowledgeable, and dependable. Reading the latest management books is just one way to keep informed.

George Is that why you use footnotes in conversation?

Michael I what?

George You refer to things you have read as you speak. You know, the one-minute manager, the third wave, Theory Z, Theory X and Y. You're not aware of that?

Michael Not really. It just seems normal. Do you find it offensive or pretentious. I wouldn't want to appear that way.

George It's not a problem. I just wonder why you and others find it necessary to document the source of your ideas all the time as though that gave them more weight. Can't an idea just exist without having its origin made known? Why not just understand what you know?

Michael I don't know. Years of college, I guess. They make you so aware of where the ideas come from that you just continue to think that way when you leave school. I can tell you an interesting story about that, by the way.

When I was a little boy my mother would listen to the opera every Saturday afternoon – real loud too. I used to love the full orchestra, the choruses, and the applause – how exciting!

George You really got into that experience, didn't you. It sounds like you acquired a real appreciation for music.

Michael Yes, but when I went to college, I had to take a course in music appreciation. I was really expecting a wonderful course where we could sit around and appreciate music.

We spent all our class time hearing *about* music – composer's names and dates, analysis of styles and periods – and barely heard any music. What a disappointment. I felt the same in botany. The endless classification schemes for plants did little for my appreciation of nature.

- George That's an interesting story. We're so intellectual that we forget about our direct involvement with things. The Tao has many nice passages to confirm your point:
- When wisdom and intelligence are born,
the great pretense begins. (18)
- Michael I guess it is pretentious to speak using footnotes. It shows off my intellectual heritage, but I'm not sure it makes me a more effective person or manager. But on the other hand, we do have to name things just so we can identify them and communicate with one another.
- George Perhaps not always. An understanding of the Tao does not depend on knowing who Lao Tsu was or when he lived, or what caused him to write it. The Tao just is – complete and whole without footnotes:
- Once the whole is divided, the parts need names.
There are already enough names.
One must know when to stop.
Knowing when to stop averts trouble. (32)
- Michael That's one of the things Robert Pirsig was trying to say in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Great book that I read in college. Did you read it?
- George Yes, Mike, and you just used another footnote.
- Michael Sorry.
- George No, you've no need to apologize. We are what we are, and it's unnecessary to change to fit the Tao's prescription for your life.
- Michael But aren't you saying that the Tao is a guide to effective management? Shouldn't I read it and learn to go with the flow?
- George What the Tao means to me is greater awareness of who I am, how I fit into the world around me, and how my choices of action or non action affect the whole. Somehow, that awareness seems very important to me, not just because I'm a manager, but because I'm a human being.
- The Tao is not like a faddish management technique. It's an outlook on living, one that calls for a little introspection and one which honors a balance between acting and not acting. I hope your awareness of this grows, but you won't find that the Tao is a cookbook for effective management.
- Michael I can dig that. Oh my God, look at the time. I've got to run now. Are you free for lunch on Thursday?
- George I'll stop by at noon. See you then.

Episode Seven

Water

Michael learns about interpersonal conflicts.

Michael Oh hi George. God, I had a hell of a morning. No time to flow with the Tao today. I've got a real mess to clean up with Carol in Marketing. She was bringing this guy in for an equipment demonstration, and he went away very unimpressed, I'm afraid.

The stuff wasn't even set up when they arrived, and my technicians were a little less than courteous about the interruption. Carol was really burned. Do you have any suggestions on how to handle her?

George Nothing specific. I've had no problems with anyone in Marketing since I've been here. What do you think started it all?

Michael Well, I wasn't really sure she was coming over. The last time one of her clients was in town they never made it over. They must have hit it off too well at lunch. Anyway, this time she shows up early, and I have to take Maria and Al off the 470 prototype to set up the 5500 for Carol.

I can understand why Al was upset! His problem is saying what's on his mind in front of outsiders. He's OK as long as it's just "family," but now Carol thinks we've got a bunch of idiots working in our shop.

George I don't think that's the case.

Michael What really gets me is that we're not in sales or marketing, but everyone feels free to have us demonstrate equipment just because we've got some units handy. Maybe the sales people ought to do it themselves, although most of them can't even turn the equipment on.

George It sounds like *you* have a problem. Have you given any thought to the long term effects of a major conflict with Marketing?

Michael The long term? Listen, George, it's no time to worry about draining the swamp when you're up to your butt in alligators. How's that for a natural metaphor?

Seriously, I have to admit that I left most of my respect for the long run back in the classroom. The brush fires just have to be put out before the major conservation effort can begin. Hey, I'm really into these metaphors, aren't I?

George Well, as long as you brought up fires, let me share what the Tao says about water:

The highest good is like water.

Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.

It flows in places that men reject and so is like the Tao. (8)

Michael The ten thousand what?

George Just a lot of things, Mike. The Chinese aren't precise about big numbers.

Michael OK, then. Let's see if I understand. Water can put out fires, of course, but the water has to be carried to the fire before it can douse the flames. That must be what managers are, water carriers. Oh hell, I don't think that makes any sense. Ugh, this rubber chicken is giving me indigestion. How's your salad?

George Fine, thanks. Maybe I can help you understand water a little more:

Under heaven nothing is more
soft and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and strong,
nothing is better; it has no equal. (78)

The reason I asked about the long run is that water works slowly – slowly but effectively. Do you understand?

Michael I understand that, but I don't understand how my understanding will get Carol Thompson to understand. George, this is likely to all hit the fan by Monday. Can't you find something in there that works a little faster. Just a second, George. Jack, could I have another beer? Thanks.

George Let me try another Taoist view on water:

Why is the sea king of a hundred streams?
Because it lies below them.
Therefore it is the king of a hundred streams.

If the sage would guide the people,
he must serve with humility.
If he would lead them,
he must follow behind.
In this way when the sage rules,
the people will not feel oppressed;
When he stands before them,
they will not be harmed.
The whole world will support him and
will not tire of him. (66)

Michael What you're saying is that I should ease up and not be so aggressive in situations like this, that I should *be* the water rather than using the water to fight fires.

George Well, actually you're saying that, not me. I would agree with your interpretation, however.

Michael So when people come in conflict with one another, they should back off and "flow" with the situation rather than combating it; Right? Well suppose I back off and Carol goes for the throat. Where am I then? Your Tao philosophy certainly makes you vulnerable unless everyone plays by the same rules.

George Maybe she would find it difficult to be aggressive if you were more passive.

Michael You mean like a new green limb on a tree being harder to cut while the old brittle limbs cut much easier? I suppose that's in the book too.

George The brittle is easily shattered;
 The small is easily scattered. (64)

Michael Heavy, heavy. Go on.

George OK. Let's see how this fits the situation:

A man is born gentle and weak.
 At his death he is hard and stiff.
 Green plants are tender and filled with sap.
 At their death they are withered and dry.

The hard and strong will fall.
 The soft and weak will overcome. (76)

Michael What a great idea! Carol Thompson, have I got a surprise for you – an *apology*. I never thought about it before, but if I agree with everything she says, she'll be totally disarmed.

If she keeps after me she'll just punch herself out, and everyone will think she's a barracuda. Not bad, George. That's a neat trick. What else can you tell me?

George I'm not sure I've told you anything, Mike, except a little bit about water.

Michael Well, you've given me a new angle on this morning's crisis. I'd better get back now to see what else has blown up. How about getting together for a drink tomorrow after work. There's something else I'd like to get your advice on. Clancy's at five?

George Sounds fine. See you there.

Episode Eight

Simplicity in the Complicated

Michael learns to approach problems more creatively.

Michael Hi George.

George Hi Mike. I saved you a seat.

Michael Sorry I'm late. We're still having problems getting stable readings on the prototypes. It's got everyone confused. In fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I've been considering a recommendation to abandon further testing on the prototype until R & D comes up with answers to the current problems we've been having.

But, I don't know how to approach the problem gracefully. You know Bob Carlin well. How would he would react to having the 470s back in R & D before we've completed our testing. I really feel that we've wasted enough time on the thing. The problems don't seem to have anything to do with our test procedures, so it must be the equipment.

George Well, I can tell you that Bob is a very thorough guy, and it's not likely that he would send along any prototypes which he knew might give you problems. Have you talked to him about it?

Michael Heavens no. Frankly, the whole thing scares me to death, but I wouldn't admit that to anyone but you.

George Let's see what we have. You can't locate the reasons for the problems, and you're reluctant to confront Bob. Have you tried everything?

Michael Absolutely! All the standard procedures in the book. We're just not getting any reliability in our readings. The only thing left is instability in the equipment, and that's R & D's fault. We've tried everything else.

George Even the counterpoints?

Michael You don't ever tire of that Tao stuff, do you George? Look, I've got a technical problem to solve, and I can't see where your book, as great as it may be, serves as a technical manual on 470 prototypes.

George Try to settle down, Mike. We'll solve your problem. All I meant about counterpoints was to look at the whole problem from another angle. That's what creative problem solving is all about, and it sounds like you could use some creativity.

Michael I don't know. We've got some pretty sharp people down in the shop, and they've drawn blanks.

George Well let me be clearer about what I mean:

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. (11)

Michael I've heard that before somewhere, but you're going to have to be a little clearer than that. Are you saying that I should look for doors and windows, the things that aren't there, to solve my problem?

George That's a good start, Mike. We're certainly accustomed to looking at objects and not the space around them. Maybe that's why we get stuck so often. It's not just substance and emptiness, though. For instance:

The softest thing in the universe
overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.
That without substance can enter where there is no room.
Hence I know the value of non action.

Teaching without words and work without doing
are understood by very few. (43)

Michael Back to water, right? Water is soft and my problem is looking very, very hard right now. But, I can't believe that I'm going to solve it by non action. In fact, I almost asked Larry to come in on the weekend to give it one last shot before Monday.

George What happens on Monday?

Michael Well, nothing really, but I didn't want to spend forever on it. I get real impatient living with other people's mistakes. We've got better things to do with our time.

George You seem awfully sure of that. What I'm trying to get you to understand is that you might benefit by defining your problem in a completely different way. See if this helps:

See simplicity in the complicated.
Achieve greatness in little things.

In the universe the difficult things
are done as if they are easy.
In the universe great acts
are made up of small deeds.
The sage does not attempt anything very big,
and thus achieves greatness. (63)

Michael That sounds hopeful. Maybe what you mean is I'm putting too much pressure on myself and my staff to succeed. Maybe there really isn't much of a problem here at all. I could just go on as we've been doing with one difference – we wouldn't get upset by the lack of progress.

George Sounds interesting. Can you do that?

Michael Ha, I don't know. All my life, I've pushed and pushed. It's harder than hell to sit back and take what you call non action. It's a lot harder for me than acting, I'll tell you that. Do you think that approach would work here? I mean, it seems like flowing means letting things slide.

George Well, I don't think the Tao says to do nothing. But for every decision we make, there is the option of non action which, as you say, is often more difficult for us to take. But don't miss the point. The Tao is also about being careful, about not making mistakes, and success:

People usually fail when they are on the verge of success.
So give as much care to the end as to the beginning;
then there will be no failure. (64)

Michael So I should start and end carefully and be aware that I don't have to take action all the time. That makes sense. And I sure can see the advantage of avoiding a confrontation with Bob Carlin.

But, what if we never find out what's wrong with the 470s? What if it just rots in our shop without finding out who's to blame for its reliability problems?

George Maybe that would be an appropriate burial ground for the unit as well as your problem.

Michael I'll get the check, George. See you next week.

Episode Nine

Bearing Yet Not Possessing

Michael learns about the androgynous blending of masculine and feminine styles.

- Michael Hey George, what's new?
- George I'm working on the training reports from the departments. There are requests for programs we didn't see a few years ago, and I've got to make recommendations to Human Resources on which ones to do.
- Michael I got some strange suggestions from my people. Six requests for women in management, a couple for communication training, and one on time management. I hate to be critical, but I couldn't see the value of the women's stuff, so I didn't put it in my report. Did anyone else?
- George Put in for women in management? Sure. It seems like a legitimate request. What's your objection?
- Michael Well, I don't know why we can't do the same management training for everyone, without discriminating by sex. Besides, what do they do in those sessions that's so special? If women want to get ahead in business, they should do the same things any manager should. Unless they're just plotting to take over, of course.
- George I think it's more a matter of survival than taking over. And women in business do face special problems, partly because they're in the minority and because of their sex. And I don't mean that all women behave the same, either. Sex is an issue mainly because there are two of them.
- Michael Two sexes? Well of course, George, that's what makes life interesting.
- George Think what it would be like if we were in the minority, say, in a company with 10% males and 90% females.
- Michael Sounds terrific.
- George I suspect you'd have some need to connect with the other men and figure out how to work in a more feminine environment to get your work done. That's one of the issues women face in our company. I don't imagine they're delighted by the need to act like men to succeed in business, but that's precisely what we expect of them most of the time.
- Michael Why don't we make it easy for them, and all act like women. Ha, Ha. I really think the whole issue is overworked, but I'm willing to listen. What does your Tao book say?
- George 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. (10)

Michael Yeah, but that's such a limiting stereotype for women. I don't think modern women – the ones I know, at least – are going to buy into that role anymore. That appears to be sexist!

George Perhaps you missed the point. This is not a prescription for women. It's a plea for wholeness. It's offering *you* suggestions for becoming a complete manager, not just a masculine one.

Michael Me? What do you mean, complete?

George Be really whole,
And all things will come to you. (22)

Michael OK, but you've got to tell me what being whole is all about and how it relates to what we were talking about . . . What *were* we talking about, anyway? Sex?

George Yes. But keep in mind that sex is a biological distinction. What we're really talking about is behavior and cultural definitions of what's appropriate for males and females.

Michael OK, George. My point is that sex role stereotypes have changed so much that women aren't about to accept traditional female behaviors. The culture has changed, so you can't go back even 25 years, much less 2500, for advice on training women managers.

George You're right. So let's not talk about women managers or male managers. Just managers, of either sex.

Michael OK.

George The *Tao Te Ching* teaches harmony and balance and being whole. One aspect of wholeness is to be both masculine and feminine. When the verse asks, "can you play the role of woman?," it's not just asking women to do so but men also. Even men managers.

Michael But that's weird, George.

George Don't be threatened. We're not talking about sex, or sexual preference. What I mean is the integration of masculine and feminine styles, not male and female sexual characteristics. There's a big difference.

Michael Go on.

George All right:

Know the strength of a man,
But keep a woman's care!

Know the white,
But keep the black!

Know honor,
Yet keep humility! (28)

Can you see that the man-woman pair is similar to the others. They're opposite, yet complementary. The black print would not be visible

unless the page were white, and there's a careful balance between honor and humility.

Michael So it's not impossible to be strong like a man and show a woman's care?

George Paradoxical but not impossible. In fact it's a great combination.

Michael What do you think of as feminine behaviors?

George Generally, I think of things like gentle, warm, nurturing, intuitive, soft, and receptive when we say feminine. Masculine suggests rough, independent, strong, hard, analytical, and cold.

But each set of behaviors is limiting. The training programs deal with expanding the possibilities and becoming a more complete person.

Michael Well, I can see how women would get along better in business by using some masculine behaviors, because organizations are usually pretty masculine places. But I'd probably be worse off trading my masculinity for a more feminine style. Hmm. It sounds weird just to say it.

George Organizations will change as people in them change. And if the words "masculine" and "feminine" bother you, I have another one for you.

Michael What?

George Androgyny.

Michael Androgyny?

George Yes, androgyny. It means a combination of the traditional masculine and feminine traits. And it doesn't mean giving up one to attain the other. They're blended together to make a more effective whole. In fact, that's one thing the women in management programs talk about a lot.

Michael Maybe men should have programs that teach androgynous styles too. Is androgyny in the *Tao Te Ching*?

George Oh yes. Masculine is called yang, and feminine is called yin.

The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.
They achieve harmony by combining these forces. (42)

Michael I've heard about yin and yang before, but I didn't think of it as describing androgyny.

Episode Ten

Blunt the Sharpness, Untangle the Knot

Michael discovers George's role as his androgynous mentor.

- Michael Who around here would you say is an androgynous manager?
- George You know Bill Evans in engineering design?
- Michael Yes.
- George Well, he helps his new people along in a very gentle way. The word *mentor* describes it well. He assumes responsibility for helping his people solve their work and even personal problems.
- He shows them what to do, introduces them to the right people, and supports them whenever he can. And none of that detracts from his ability to dissect problems and structure their solutions. He just does both quite effortlessly.
- Michael Interesting. You know I was trying to think if I had a mentor or knew any androgynous managers in the company. I guess you come closest, George. Actually, you fit the description pretty well. Do you think of yourself as my mentor?
- George Well, one of them maybe. I think I can teach you some things, but I prefer not to just tell you outright how to get over the hurdles.
- Michael You try to get me to discover things for myself. Don't think that has escaped me because it's just what my mother used to do. She'd help me by getting me to discover the answers on my own, whether it was my homework, girl friends, buying clothes, or anything.
- Of course, my dad just ordered me around and told me exactly what he expected of me. I never figured her style would be considered good management because dad was the big tycoon. But, we never really got close the way I did with mom. She always had time to understand.
- George It's not only managerial roles that benefit from androgyny. Parenting is becoming more androgynous too. You know Jim Bobko in sales?
- Michael Oh, yes.
- George Well, he works four 10-hour days because his wife travels to Washington for a meeting every Monday. She leaves Sunday night and comes home Monday night, so Jim takes the day off to be with Jon and Mark, their two sons. He makes up the time by working from 7 to 5 Tuesday through Friday.
- Michael Doesn't his wife have a pretty good job? I know I've heard something about her.
- George She's Joan Marin, and she's consulting for the State Department on the Middle East. She testified in a couple of Senate hearings last year and made the papers here.

Michael Oh yeah, I met her at a cocktail party in October last year and couldn't figure out who she was. I wonder why she didn't change her name when she and Jim got married. It's confusing.

George Well, think about her clients in the consulting firm. They'd wonder who Joan Bobko was. Jim told me about it when they got married. It wasn't a feminist show of independence or anything like that.

They simply saw no reason to change it since she had already done a lot professionally with her own name. He said he certainly wasn't going to change his name, so they kept their original names. It wasn't a big deal.

Michael So they both work, raise the kids, and probably cook and clean together. How sweet. Are you that androgynous at home, George?

George I try. It's more a matter of caring and helping each other than forcing a trendy new life style onto a stable relationship:

Blunt the sharpness,
Untangle the knot,
Soften the glare,
Merge with the dust. (4)

Michael So how did you become such an effective androgynous mentor or guru?

George I'm not sure. I certainly didn't go through a training program. It was more a combination of some reading and having good gurus of my own. There were several people who guided me through a transition phase in my career and personal life.

Michael Oh, yes, the mid-life crisis. I suppose I have that to look forward to.

George Well, it certainly doesn't have to be a crisis. I call it a transition because there were some real changes, but it didn't hurt at all. My gurus were very gentle people.

Michael They weren't really gurus were they? Somehow I can't picture you at the foot of an old Indian sage basking in the wisdom of the East.

George Well, no, they weren't like that at all. A guru is simply a teacher, and anyone can be a teacher if you're receptive enough to be a pupil. Look, I'd like to tell you about them, but I have a plane to catch this afternoon. Some other time would be better.

Michael No rush. Have a good trip.

Episode Eleven

Embracing the One

George describes his own teachers.

- Michael What a pleasant morning I had, George. The deal with Engineering Services went through without a hitch, and I got a call from Wayne Lewis at the home office to go up there to talk about some new possibilities for me. This could mean a transfer and promotion, maybe to Los Angeles.
- George Might be nice. Did Wayne give you any details?
- Michael All he said was that I fit into some of the new directions the company is taking in the next two years. It's funny. One thing he mentioned was the change in me that's occurred during the past 12 months.
- Things get back to headquarters that I had no idea of. I know my performance has shot up, but he was saying things about my attitude, how I deal with people, you know, stuff like that.
- George You've mellowed out a lot since I first met you. You have more things in perspective now. You used to be, shall we say, a little pushy and even self-centered. The MBA syndrome maybe.
- Michael Well, I feel a lot better now too. I'm on a health kick – lots of running, better diet, and more sleep. I think I spend less time than I used to on work, but I must be getting more done. Maybe some of that Chinese wisdom has sunk in. You know, "work smarter not harder." That has to be in the Tao somewhere.
- George Probably is.
- Michael You were going to tell me about your gurus today, the ones that helped you become androgynous. Who are they? People with the company?
- George Yes. One of them is Herman Williams whom I've worked with for years. He really got me started with his interest in Eastern philosophy, androgyny, and other kinds of non traditional thinking.
- Michael He looks pretty conservative to me. That's a surprise to know that he's into all that stuff.
- George Well, he gets into a lot of things, but it's for personal reasons – not because it's the latest fad or anything. You'd never know it by looking at him, and his work has always been very sound. Herman is just a considerate, competent manager, and he has some interests that I got interested in too.
- Michael Like the Tao?
- George Sure. I realized that I had a lot of skepticism about things I knew nothing about. Well, I skimmed the *Tao Te Ching* in about 15 minutes at his house one day and found it to be beautiful. Such simplicity, but

paradoxical simplicity. It got me to question my own values, especially my tendency to criticize other people's work as well as my own.

Michael How do you mean that, because I know I do the same thing just as a matter of routine. Something should be changed so I point it out.

George Right, but how much of that is an involuntary expression of our critical Western minds, and how much is conscious concern for improvement.

The Tao taught me that everything does not have to be perfect, that sometimes things change themselves, and that non action is sometimes more successful than action. I was ready to change my professional style and aspects of my personal life.

Michael OK, I have a question for you. Isn't it hard as hell to change when you're say 35 or 40, and you've been trained to think a certain way. I know you pull it off real well, but wasn't it hard to change.

George Mike, it was one of the most pleasant and gentle experiences I have had. Let me explain it to you this way. The first 20 years of my life were spent learning how to think.

During the next 15 years, I chose and developed my professional specialization – through business school, graduate courses, training programs, early job experiences. I really got good at what I was doing and moved through the various promotions about as fast as anyone.

Michael Yeah. So far I'm right with you. This LA thing sounds real promising.

George Well, anyway, there I was at 34 with lots accomplished, but for some reason, the future looked fairly unexciting. It's part of an "is that all there is?" questioning that I guess a lot of people go through. That's when I got interested in Herman's book.

I suppose if I had picked up the same material 5 years earlier I would have either ridiculed it or ignored it. The point is I was receptive at 34, and Herman is a teacher to me only because I was ready to be a pupil.

Michael Was that the beginning of your mid-life crisis?

George Yes, except it was a transition, not a crisis. I didn't experiment wildly with non conventional thinking or take up exotic self-study programs.

Very simply, I just began to see the world differently – call it a more holistic view. I saw limits to endless analytical thinking, and gradually the things that really mattered to me became sharply focused.

Michael What were they?

George My family, music, developing friendships with some new people, and my own health and fitness. I also came to understand my own creative abilities once I learned to back away from my narrow, critical approach to everything. And I also became more self-confident and less defensive about my work. I've done a lot of things that other people haven't, and I've done them on my own terms.

Michael But those were things you did using your specialized training. Weren't you afraid you might lose that by pursuing Eastern mysticism?

George Not at all. First, I have not thrown any of my training away. What I've done is augment that style with a more holistic, receptive approach. And, I see that my recent projects are better technically and artistically, than my earlier work. You know the Graves project I headed up.

Michael Sure. The talk of the company two years ago,

George Well, I was consciously aware of approaching that from both an analytic or Western mode and a holistic Eastern mode. When I was putting the final report together, the whole thing came together so beautifully:

Therefore wise men embrace the one
and set an example to all.
Not putting on a display,
they shine forth.
Not justifying themselves,
they are distinguished. (22)

It was a marvelous experience, and I know I couldn't have done it when I was 30.

Michael It sounds like Herman Williams had less to do with your changes than you did. Why do you consider him to be that important?

George Well, because he was there when I was ready to change. It could have been anyone. If you're learning things from me, it's not because I'm the best teacher. It's because I'm here. If you're not receptive then it won't matter how good your teacher is.

Michael I'll give that some thought. Sometime let's talk about other people that you have learned from. I might get some insight from your experiences.

Episode Twelve

The Valley Spirit Never Dies

George describes his work relationship with his female colleagues.

George One really important learning experience that helped me better understand the Tao happened when I worked with Lynda Reese. After we got to know each other, we co-authored a major project report.

Michael So how did you meet this Lynda Reese, if you don't mind my asking?

George Well, I had just moved here to coordinate two product development teams that were having trouble meeting deadlines and budgets. I was the 33-year old, designated hotshot, and everyone the least bit insecure kept clear of me. Then one day in July, I got a call from Cleveland.

It was Lynda Reese who was in our management training program being rotated through marketing, sales, and product development. She had heard about me, and since she was steering her career toward product development, she thought we might discuss our common interests.

Michael What did you say to her?

George Well, I told her I was busy because we had a national meeting in San Francisco. So she suggested meeting in San Francisco. I invited her to an open session we had planned on the morning of the last day.

I hardly gave it a second thought except that it seemed pretty unusual that a woman, or any trainee, would call with that kind of request. Usually they just do what they're told, which does not include trips to national meetings.

Michael Lynda doesn't sound at all hesitant to say where she's coming from.

George Not at all! At the San Francisco meeting, the session ended and people were standing around talking, when this woman, about 30 years old, introduced herself as Lynda Reese and asked if I had time for a cup of coffee. So we went to the hotel lobby to sit and talk.

Lynda explained that she was interested in the computer aspects of project scheduling. A professor she had in graduate school suggested a session on the human aspects of such systems for a conference. She was trying to organize a session and wondered if I was interested. It sounded like a good idea, so I agreed to take part.

Michael None of what you say sounds very unusual.

George But the whole thing started me thinking about the problems women face in the business world. You see, I strongly believe in equality and affirmative action. But, I had never worked with a woman except having them as secretaries. After Lynda contacted me, I realized that people like me were partly responsible for sex discrimination because we didn't want to get closely involved with women in a work situation.

Michael Why not?

- George Because it complicates things, or at least it has the potential to complicate. One way to keep things simple is never to put yourself in awkward situations that might produce misunderstandings. That action – not my thinking, because I’m a liberal on paper – but the actions I took were sexually discriminating.
- Michael That’s better than going around looking for excitement. If you came on to her sexually, that would have been worse.
- George Oh, I agree. But my point is that by avoiding the possibility of getting to know her any better, like over dinner, we both lose professionally. When two men go to dinner, they discuss business and get to know each other pretty well. No one thinks anything about that. But we have this dual standard for men and women. Repeated a thousand times each day, reactions like that add up to sexual discrimination.
- Michael So what do you do about it?
- George Well, it’s funny, because we did end up in New York with a group of people from our panel and had a drink after the meeting. Then, as we were saying good-bye just before I left for the airport, Lynda reached out and touched my arm and thanked me for coming up for the session. There was something about the touch that was warmer than the usual handshake. The word I would use to describe it is friendly, but words don’t really describe my feeling.
- Michael How could you describe it then?
- George Well, it amazed me that so much meaning could be communicated in such a simple way. I understood immediately that Lynda liked me and appreciated my contributions at the meeting. There weren’t any hidden implications or ambiguities about sexual involvement either. But those are the kinds of things that are awkward and inappropriate when put into words.
- Michael I agree. Some things don’t come across very well when you try to explain them.
- George I also learned the value of feminine expression. Touching is not a masculine thing to do, and if we restrict ourselves to masculine expression, we miss out on that power to communicate. The feminine part has a certain spirit that fits so well with the masculine:
- 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. (6)
- Michael Always there, but not as visible as the masculine mountains.
- George But it’s so important to use – not just for women but for men too. Before I met Lynda, I never really understood that.

Episode Thirteen

Having Deep Roots and a Firm Foundation

George describes the rewards of working relationships between men and women.

- Michael What developed next in the working relationship with Lynda?
- George The next time I saw her was two months later at another inter-divisional meeting, this time in LA. She was in the process of being transferred to our Boston office and had managed to get herself on the program at the LA meeting.
- Michael What was she doing on the program?
- George She was making a presentation on some of the human issues involved in using computers in project scheduling, and I was scheduled for a similar presentation on graphic displays of project networks using computers. The sessions went really well, and I began to see how close the professional interests were between Lynda and me.
- Michael It sounds like you had some specific areas of common interest.
- George Yes we did. I asked her to be on a task force that was to meet the following year in Colorado, and she said she'd love to be involved. We both felt the company should take a broader assessment of the whole area of planning and control systems.
- Getting corporate level studies out to the divisions was only possible if the divisions would cooperate in the task forces. It was great to find someone with such an interest going to work in the Boston division.
- Michael It seems that this get-together proved very useful for both of you.
- George Well, I really felt comfortable about our potential to work together, and when she left, I gave her one of those affectionate tugs on the arm. I also told her to take care because there were some aggressive people in the Boston office who enjoyed making trouble for new recruits. She said she liked the challenge and thanked me for caring so much.
- Michael That sounds nice. You seemed to be handling this relationship well.
- George Well, I thought so too. But after a while, I began to question my own motivations for wanting to work with Lynda. Basically, I felt guilty about having a woman as a friend.
- Michael You're pretty hard on yourself, George. I mean, you didn't really have anything to feel guilty about.
- George No, but that's how I felt at the time. I didn't talk to her too much for a year, but I did ask her to do two things. First, I wanted her to work with me on the corporate report as a co-author. Second, I wanted her to consider a transfer to our office.
- Both requests were hard for me to make in my then state of confusion. One part of me said these were the proper things to do given our shared

professional interests. Another part said I was out of my mind and hoped she would say no.

Michael Did she?

George She said yes to writing the report but no to the transfer. She mentioned that she was becoming part of a two-career family which restricted her options for moving to a new location.

But that wouldn't affect her ability to work on the report. Again, it was good to have some reassurance that she was comfortable with our working relationship and wasn't looking for anything more.

Michael How did the co-authored report go?

George The first stages were pretty hard to coordinate until we agreed on the basic format and coverage. You see, we're both independent thinkers, and I was used to organizing things for other people to do.

Lynda saw things a little differently, and we had some cordial collisions of philosophy on the report. Actually, I almost lost interest a couple of times and was on the verge of trashing the whole idea.

Michael How did you work it out?

George Well, I was getting busier and busier on another major report so I asked Lynda if she would be willing to finish it up on her own and actually assume lead responsibility for the report.

Michael And?

George Smartest thing I ever did. She finished it, and it was a smash success around corporate for months. We both got recognition from it, and I learned one of my more valuable lessons. Don't be afraid to give up control; allow competent people to contribute and share the credit.

Michael That sounds like a quote from the *Tao Te Ching* again.

George Well, there is a nice passage in the book to say what I mean:

In caring for others and serving heaven,
there is nothing like using restraint.
Restraint begins with giving up one's own ideas.
If nothing is impossible, then there are no limits.

This is called having deep roots and a firm foundation. (59)

To me, our working relationship has become very harmonious. We're similar in our views but different in other ways. Maybe the difference in sex contributes in an intangible way; maybe not. I once imagined that Lynda was like the water, and I was the rocky shoreline.

Michael That's an interesting metaphor, Rocky.

George Well, the waves and the shore are different, but if you really look at them, they have this marvelous relationship. When I stare at the water, I understand that they get along very well together.

Episode Fourteen

The Fruit, Not the Flower

George and Lynda nourish each other's professional potential.

Michael Did your wife question this close relationship? Did she ever get jealous?

George No. I think my ability to develop good working relationships with Lynda and other women is because of a secure and happy marriage:

What is firmly established cannot be uprooted.

What is firmly grasped cannot slip away. (54)

Michael Is your friendship with Lynda the same as you have with men?

George There are some differences. For example, men don't usually share their feelings with one another unless it's anger. It's easier for me to talk about feelings with a woman. It's like what you said about the difference between your mother and your father.

I can tell Lynda how much our working together means to me, and she can hug me and thank me for being a special friend. You and I wouldn't do it in the same way, even though the same feelings might be there.

Michael You're right. But just out of curiosity, how did you move from this arm touching to hugging?

George Well, Lynda and I had known each other for three years, but I think we had only met face to face about five times. But we had talked on the phone a lot and of course emailed a lot of things back and forth for our report. Anyway, I was in Boston for some personal business and asked Lynda to meet me for breakfast one morning.

Michael At least when you are face-to-face, a handshake or even a hug is physically possible.

George Now in the meantime, we had gotten some excellent feedback on our joint report from the corporate people, and Lynda was considering this promotion and transfer to the Research Division in San Francisco.

So we were both excited and pleased with the work we had done and the prospects for the future. So when she met me in the hotel lobby, I just reached out and hugged her, and she hugged back. In that instance, a handshake just wouldn't have been appropriate.

Michael Sounds warm but still professional. You're telling me that you learned as much about people from Lynda as you learned about computers.

George Yes. I've learned a lot about sharing:

The sage never tries to store things up.

The more he does for others, the more he has.

The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance. (81)

Michael Have Lynda's feminine traits complemented your masculine ones?

- George Well, not really. I thought so at first. But, I can't say that Lynda is the receptive feminine while I'm the active masculine. Actually, we're similar in a lot of ways, and the communication about concepts and methods comes easily.
- Now it's more of a partnership of equals – two androgynous workers approaching projects in the same way. But, I have to give her credit for encouraging my feminine side to develop.
- Michael I think I understand. That's all part of your mid-life transition, isn't it?
- George Oh, yes, very much so. The development of my feeling side has been so important. Plus the renewed professional confidence and movement into newer areas in the company. It all fits together now as the result of a very gentle but true transformation.
- Michael What about other people? I'm told that one of the issues in the women in management area is how other people perceive a man and a woman, say, having dinner together. When you throw in all this hugging, aren't people going to form impressions that something more is going on?
- George Maybe, especially if the couple looks good together. But, I look at it this way. Some people are going to see an affair because of where they're coming from. If soap operas are your reference point for understanding social behavior, then right away you're handicapped.
- I'm quick to clear up any doubts if people ask questions about "how we met" or "how long have we been together." I just tell them the truth:
- The truly great man dwells on what is real
and not what is on the surface,
on the fruit and not the flower. (38)
- I don't see any other way to handle it.
- Michael Sure. If there's nothing more than what you've described; why should you be defensive?
- George He who knows how to live can walk abroad
without fear of rhinoceros or tiger.
- For in him rhinoceroses can find
no place to thrust their horn,
tigers no place to use their claws. (50)
- Michael That's a nice way to put it. I can see why you like this book so much.
- George Eventually, as men and women work more often in teams, the assumptions about sexual involvements won't be made. I think Lynda and I could serve as a role model for other people, maybe like yourself, who could benefit from a close professional and feeling relationship.
- Michael I'd like to meet her some day. She sounds like a special person.

Episode Fifteen

Self or Wealth

Michael confronts the stresses of work and achievement.

Several years have passed. Michael has prospered in Los Angeles by heading up the corporation's information systems department. George has traveled west for a reunion with his protégé

George Michael, it's great to see you. How long has it been? Five years already?

Michael Almost six. This sunshine really agrees with me. Just look at this office!

George Nice. When I heard about your promotion, I wondered what sort of splendor you'd insist on. Nice view of the bay.

Michael Nothing like progress. Hey, I've got myself a sailboat. Now I go out and "flow" every weekend to escape the headaches that success has brought.

George Do you get headaches frequently?

Michael Oh, from time to time. It varies with the pressures around here. I like to run a very responsive department, and sometimes I promise to deliver projects too soon. We've always got rush work to be done.

George Are you taking anything for the discomfort?

Michael Mostly aspirin, valium, and sailing.

George Do they work?

Michael No, but I think I should be doing something. Hey, why are we talking about my problems? Let me tell you about my successes.

George To me they sound like the same thing. Do you have that copy of the *Tao Te Ching* I sent you? I think you'll find some advice in it.

Michael Yes, it's down there. George, I hope you didn't come all the way out here to read to me from that book again. Come on – give me a break.

George Ease up, Mike. I'm not here to scold you for not following the Tao. But, the book looks like you haven't opened it. Here's what I wanted to read:

It is not wise to rush about.

Controlling the breath causes strain.

If too much energy is used, exhaustion follows.

This is not the way of the Tao.

Whatever is contrary to Tao will not last long. (55)

Michael OK, OK. I know all about stress. That's why I got the boat. And don't give me that line about not striving or achieving, because I certainly couldn't have afforded the boat without accomplishing something. So you see, there is some harmony in my life. Through achievement, I can better enjoy my leisure.

George When you're out sailing, do you have tension or get a headache?

Michael Well . . . yes. But, that's just a carryover from the work environment.

George Which means what? Are you blaming your stress on something else?

Michael Sure. Work is tough. I've got an endless set of demands, deadlines to meet, political battles to fight, and keeping up with the technology is a major challenge. But I've done it! I'm successful! George, don't tell me I'm not entitled to a little headache now and then.

George I won't belittle your success, but I think you're wrong to blame "the work" for your stress.

Michael You mean it's all in my head?

George Where else could it be? Yes, this notion of getting ahead is all in your mind too. You seem to think that this idea of "work without doing" is a joke. Let me ask you this. Where is your path to success leading you.

Michael Well, I would never have gotten into the systems area without a lot of self-motivated studying. When I went into applications development, I thought there was a lot I could do to turn the area around. No one else seemed aggressive enough, so I pushed my way in. I became director in twelve months and moved up to Systems VP three years later.

George Have you ever felt like not advancing rapidly?

Michael No. I get too restless being in one place too long. Besides, if I keep moving, I'll keep getting those nice salary increases, bonuses, travel, and expense accounts, and a bigger company car. Why stay put?

George *To be restless is to lose one's control. (26)*

Michael Not true! I control more people, larger budgets, and a state-of-the-art computer operation. I sail when I want, and I read what I want. And I don't want to hear any more about the *Tao Te Ching*.

George You're a different person than the one I knew six years ago. You seem to think that you control everything:

*The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering. (48)*

Michael I suppose you're going to tell me to let the analysts and programmers do their own thing.

George Have you tried it?

Michael Don't be silly.

George Why not? Your seriousness has only brought you wealth, headaches, and a sailboat. What about yourself? Do you know who you are?

*Fame or self: Which matters more?
Self or wealth: Which is more precious?
Gain or loss: Which is more painful?*

*He who is attached to things will suffer much.
He who saves will suffer heavy loss.
A contented man is never disappointed.*

He who knows when to stop does
not find himself in trouble.
He will stay forever safe. (44)

Michael OK. I'll get rid of everything and become a monk. Would that please you? You make it sound like I've committed some kind of crime!

George Don't get rid of anything. That's as foolish as acquiring it in the first place. It's interfering too. What I'm asking is that you get off the merry-go-round and see where you really are right now.

Michael Well, I'm tired of these headaches. But I like the boat . . . No, I don't like the boat. In fact, I think I hate my boat because it's so much like work. You know, I paid \$750 for an alarm system so nobody would steal it.

George Maybe you had what you needed before you bought the boat:

Better stop short than fill to the brim.
Over sharpen 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. (9)

Michael That's a real cheerful book you've got there.

George If you hate your boat because it's like work, should I assume that you hate work too?

Michael Did I say that? No, I like my job. What else should I be doing now? We've really done a lot for the company, and grown a lot. But, yes, something's definitely missing. It doesn't *feel* right.

George Now you're listening to your feelings. What are they telling you?

Michael Well, I can see that this striving for success has no end to it. Even if I get to be the president of the company, I won't be satisfied because there's more to do. And if VP of Information Systems is enough to produce severe tension headaches, just think what the CEO's job will do.

George When was the last time you did something just for the sake of doing it, without any thought of the recognition it would bring?

Michael Once I worked on a flow chart for an entire weekend. I didn't have to do it, but I just got interested in solving the problem. I did it for me.

George What else have you done for you? And don't tell me about sailing.

Michael I can't say. Maybe nothing. Everything needs to be done because someone else wants it or because it's going to score points for us. But, now I'm feeling that too much success may not be an advantage.

George Too much success is not an advantage.
Do not tinkle like jade
Or clatter like stone chimes. (39)

Episode Sixteen

Move with the Present

Michael struggles with his new awareness and understanding.

Michael I've never really understood what you have to do to apply the Taoist principle of non action to the work place. I can see what it's saying about success and all that, but how can I work by not doing anything?

George Doing nothing can literally mean *doing nothing*. But if you really learn to do nothing, with all your heart and soul, you will be rid of your stress, have no more headaches, and as a special bonus, you will actually enjoy being on your sailboat.

Michael Huh? If I do nothing, I won't get very far in the boat. For starters, it's tied up at the dock. The engine must be started, the lines released, sails raised, and on and on. I could go on for hours telling you about *doing* what needs to be done for sailing.

George I can see why you get headaches. To you, sailing is a series of things to accomplish. I'm talking about an attitude, not a series of actions.

Michael An attitude about sailing as doing nothing? Nice idea but hard to implement.

George Well, consider the prospect of converting all of your daily tasks into joys instead of chores. Simply through a change of attitude. You see, you have this notion that who you are is defined by what you do. But if you can be really whole, and accept who you are,

All things will come to you. (22)

Michael My boat will just sail by itself?

George Sure. Of course, you said your boat was tied up at the dock because that's part of the essence of "boatness." So in the appropriate time and place, release the dock lines so that the boat can leave its mooring.

Michael But that means I'm going to do something.

George No, No. You are going to experience the act of the lines being released. In the words of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Move with the present. (14)

Think about that: move with the present. Not "do this," or "do that," but move with the present.

Michael Move with the present, without doing?

George Exactly. When you view the dock lines as an inseparable part of the boating experience, the desire to accomplish anything will disappear. You will not feel obliged to perform a series of chores. You will become part of the whole. Then you are not doing; you are being. And headaches are not a part of the whole, so they will melt away.

Michael This is too much. "Boatness?" You're making up words.

George Continue moving with the present. Release the lines. The engine engages in reverse. The boat leaves the slip. Engine to forward. Everything happens at just the right time – not too soon or too late or the essence of sailing will be lost.

Everything happens in the present, and you are a part of it. You're not causing it or affected by it. It's just happening. The present is in you and with you, in the boat and with the boat, in the water and with the water, and the sky, and everything. Imagine! Isn't *being* joyful?

Michael If only I understood what it was! It seems to me that you can't just *be* without a lot of practice.

George Yes. You will have to practice. You have several decades of confused thinking to overcome. And practice is the only way to get there. But practice *not doing*. Learn to become a part of whatever is happening and move with it. That's what requires practice.

Michael How will you know when I'm ready?

George I will know right away, just as I know you are not ready now. You will realize when you are there that you never left in the first place. Then you will realize there never has been anything to accomplish.

Michael Suppose I learn to be and do nothing. Won't the CEO be a little disturbed to have a Taoist vice-president of information systems?

George You misunderstand what I'm trying to say:

Those who know do not talk.
Those who talk do not know. (56)

He will never know that you are doing nothing.

Michael But if I sit at my desk all day, make no phone calls, cancel all meetings, and do other kinds of not doing, he will notice in short order.

George Back to square one. You don't do not doing. Non action does not mean returning to a permanent fetal position from which you will never emerge. It's just like the dock lines.

When the essence of telephoning is present, become part of the flow and center on the essence. Talk on the telephone, attend a meeting, give your manager of applications development an assignment.

Just do what needs to be done. (30)

What will your CEO notice? He will notice something – not a change in action but a change in attitude. Remember it's all in the mind.

Michael Up there with my headache.

George At one level your boss will not notice any change, that of the so-called doing. But at another level, he will be astonished by the change in your mental attitude.

Tao abides in non action.
Yet nothing is left undone.
If kings and lords observed this,
the ten thousand things would develop naturally. (37)

This is perhaps the ultimate paradox. Doing and not doing arise together and are in fact one and the same.

Michael This not doing is really going to take some doing.

George Yes!

Michael If my present mental attitude took three decades to acquire, it may take three more decades to overcome those habits of mind.

George That may be true.

Michael It hardly seems worth it – it's much easier to stick with my valium.

George That's your choice.

Michael Well, I want to change, but you've given me nothing concrete to grasp. You're not talking skills, and I feel like I'm in the dark.

George In the beginning those who knew the
Tao did not try to enlighten others,
but kept them in the dark. (65)

Michael But why? Let's get this secret out in the open. Let's save the whole world from headaches.

George There is nothing more I can tell you, Mike. I've known you for most of your career. The world has had the *Tao Te Ching* for over 2500 years. No one's hiding anything. When you are ready, the Tao will still be there for you.

I've enjoyed our conversations, but I feel they are over for a while. Don't try so hard to figure out what the Tao means. It's all right in front of you. Simply open up to the fullness of this moment.

Epilogue

Historical Perspective on the *Tao Te Ching*

The facts of Lao Tsu's life are open to considerable debate. Historians have stewed over this problem since the first century BC when Ssu-ma Ch'ien tried to be the first to write Lao Tsu's biography. He gave up in despair at the lack of materials he had to work with. The situation has not changed much in 2000 years. Today the materials are even sketchier and more hotly debated by scholars.

We do have a colorful myth about Lao Tsu, however, which is not likely to be substantiated by the "facts." Myths tend to be passed orally from generation to generation until someone takes the time to write them down. By then the story stands a good chance of having been changed numerous times. This version comes from Holmes Welch's, *Taoism: The Parting of the Way*.

The Myth of Lao Tsu

During the seventh century BC, a woman gave birth to a son while she was leaning against a plum tree. As is customary in heroic myths, such births are surrounded by unusual circumstances. In this case, he had been in the womb for 62 years. The conception had occurred when the mother was inspired by a falling star. He was born with gray hair and full speaking ability. His surprised neighbors called him "old one" or Lao Tsu as we know him today.

Lao Tsu served in several capacities in the Chinese court of Chou, the ruling dynasty from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC. Prior to becoming the court's chief archivist, he served as the palace secretary. His remarkable manner, bearing, and philosophy gradually drew a following of disciples. Lao Tsu did not seek this out and did not make a special fuss over this following. Among those who came to visit him and hear his wisdom was Confucius.

This meeting did not go well because the two men were of such different minds. Lao Tsu chastised Confucius, "Abandon your arrogant ways and countless desires, your suave demeanor and unbridled ambition, for they do not promote your welfare. That is all I have to say to you!" Confucius returned to his disciples and said that he really couldn't figure the man out. He compared Lao Tsu to a dragon that soars through the sky while no one can figure out how he does that.

This mythical philosopher lived to a ripe old age given his belated birth. When he was 160 years old, he tired of the decadence of the Chou dynasty and made his way to the western border to a self-imposed exile in the mountains. As we related in the Prologue, he was accosted by the border guard Yin Hsi who persuaded him to write down his wisdom before going into the mountains. The legend doesn't say anything about what happened to him after he went into exile.

Other Contributors

From this story, we see that Lao Tsu's life is shrouded in mystery. But an accurate account of his life is not important to our purpose. The fact that someone had these ideas is more significant than specifically who authored them. The message depends on substance, not source. In all likelihood, the *Tao Te Ching* we have today is the thinking of people before and after Lao Tsu as well as the man himself. As a result, the material has matured and developed over the centuries to our benefit.

A discussion of Lao Tsu must recognize the contribution of Chuang Tsu to the development of Taoist thought. He lived during the fourth century BC and was a major interpreter of the *Tao Te Ching*. While Lao Tsu spoke in short aphorisms that appeal to the intuition, Chuang Tsu wrote essays and dialogues. His writings consist of 33 chapters of which the first seven, or inner chapters, are thought to be his own. The others were probably added by later commentators on the prior work of Lao Tsu as well as the dialogues of Chuang Tsu in the first seven chapters.

The value of the *Inner Chapters* compared to the *Tao Te Ching* is the presentation of the ideas in the form of stories and allegories. For instance, there are eight imaginary conversations between Confucius and Lao Tsu. By choosing the characters and topics, Chuang Tsu illustrates the ideas of the *Tao Te Ching* in a concrete fashion. Our dialogues between George and Michael transfer the context to today's business world while retaining the ideas which Confucius and Lao Tsu debated.

Basic Themes of the Tao Te Ching

Holmes Welch identifies three central themes which capture the essence of the *Tao Te Ching*: inaction, the uncarved block, and Tao. Since these themes help us interpret the philosophy, they are worth examining closely.

Inaction

The concept of inaction has also been stated as non action and anti action. At best, it is an elusive concept in English. In Chinese, the term is *wei wu wei* or “not doing.” Among Westerners, the first reaction to this notion is that Lao Tsu recommended that we all sit around and do nothing. But sitting around is not doing nothing, we are in fact doing something, namely sitting around. This is more than a play on words. The question is whether sitting around is appropriate to the situation. If circumstances dictate sitting around, then that is the appropriate inaction.

Water which is a simile for many of the ideas of the *Tao Te Ching* can help us understand inaction. Even though water is the most yielding of all natural substances, it has the power to overcome the most resistant as the formation of the Grand Canyon testifies to on a monumental scale. Water seeks the low ground by flowing around rather than over or through. In a way, water succeeds through inaction rather than by taking action. Expressing its true nature, water achieves marvelous feats.

Adopting *wei wu wei* or inaction is a question of attitude that others can readily perceive in us. Inaction assumes we have confidence in others and the basic dynamics of nature. This confidence arises when we understand a situation well enough to be able to leave it alone. This is the hardest part of inaction – having the intuitive awareness that things will be OK without active intervention. It means that we should spend more time with our eyes open, paying attention to what is ongoing, and less time trying to change things.

When two people adopt an attitude of *wei wu wei*, our initial fear is that even less will get done than when one person does not act. This is not true. As George himself learns through his work with Lynda Reese, tasks have a way of almost choosing who is to do them when both parties are open and aware. One person does not have to push the other if both understand the situation well enough. The closer they come to an attitude of nonaction, the more each will receive from the other without asking for it and without giving anything up.

The Uncarved Block

The concept of the uncarved block is easier to understand if we imagine returning to the state of a newborn child. In this state, we are naturally good and simple, without pretense and pretext. The symbol of the uncarved block represents wood as it is before we shape it into something of our own making. In a similar way, it symbolizes our state before parents and society shaped us in the image that society and parents think children should become.

In our complex modern civilization, it is difficult to find an adult that has retained this naiveté. Our educational system seeks to mold us into the shape that we deem “good.” For the Taoist this process does not achieve goodness. In fact, it drives the inherent goodness out of us. In the process of socialization, our parents and our educational institutions force us to conform to the goodness norm dictated by society. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, we are free of hostility and aggression in our original uncarved block state.

It is easy to misunderstand the *Tao Te Ching* to favor the life of a recluse, with no desires of the flesh and minimum possessions. In fact, it considers desires of the flesh to be natural. It is cravings beyond the flesh that corrupt man’s nature: money, power, and the possessions that go with them. This acquisitive nature is detrimental since it turns us away from the search for the uncarved block within. To find our true selves, we need only satisfy the body’s natural capacity for food, shelter, and clothing. Once the physical needs are met, any more represents a social desire.

The metaphor of the uncarved block presents us with another Taoist paradox. The only way that we can return to our true nature is not to care if we do. When we don’t care whether we achieve this state we will have achieved it. And we cannot successfully return to our true nature for ulterior motives. The ideal is to be our true self without acting like we know that we are being our true self. The state is an inner change that does not call attention to our enlightenment. Many discoverers of the *Tao Te Ching* do not understand this and pretentiously carve new blocks to show others how aware they are.

Tao

The third major theme of the *Tao Te Ching* requires us to shift to a more esoteric consideration of the Tao. In the Prologue, we defined Tao as “way.” To speak of the way as a path is to approach the Tao on a practical level. An esoteric meaning considers Tao as “the One” or “the Ultimate.” To understand Tao, we must realize that it is a mystical concept that parallels the Western meaning of God. But there are subtle differences between Tao and God.

The first line of the *Tao Te Ching* is “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.” Some translators use “absolute” instead of “eternal” in this phrase. This sentence alludes to the Tao in two meanings. The first Tao relates to “being” in our physical world. It is the Tao that we know through experience even though we struggle in our understanding and awareness of it. The second eternal Tao lies beyond experience and is the source of “non-being.”

Where is the power in this “way” where something comes from nothing? It comes from recognizing that we are the eternal Tao. Being eternal gives us the power to rise above our desires. This does not mean that we must go to the mountains and abandon all interest in the physical world. We need only provide ourselves with some

solitude to get in touch and stay in touch with the source from which all else flows. A practitioner of the Tao is both of and not of the world at the same time.

The power of this way comes when we discover who we really are. All desires, fears, and attachments fall away in favor of a compassionate engagement in life. This path is the path of the mystic. With this discovery, the seeker understands the Tao and sees the order of the universe. Such a person unlearns the teachings of parents and society and returns to the uncarved block acting vigorously in non action. The wisdom acquired in this search for the true self must be shared with those who have not made the same progress in this discovery.

Translations of the *Tao Te Ching*

For the dialogues of George and Michael, we chose one of the numerous versions of the Chinese classic now available in English: Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. We chose the Feng and English translation because of its simple and direct language and the beautiful pictures that illustrate each page of the book. Another recent popular version was translated by Stephen Mitchell.

The source materials for translating this work into English are numerous. There are nearly 100 editions in Chinese. It is the most translated of all Chinese texts. These multiple interpretations stimulate variety in the English editions. The variety is heightened because the English and Chinese languages are so different. So a translator has flexibility and license in their interpretation of the original materials.

No English translation is really satisfactory because paradoxically it will never be as ambiguous as the Chinese original. The looseness of interpretation in Chinese accounts in part for the attraction the material draws. In this context, the translator seeks the spirit rather than the literal meaning of the work. This approach is consistent with the principles of the Tao itself.

In your further study of the *Tao Te Ching*, we recommend that you obtain a copy of your own. Look over several versions before deciding which to acquire. Since the variety is so great, find one that suits your fancy. To amplify the material, we also recommend a study of the inner chapters of Chuang Tsu. This text elaborates on the ideas in the form of stories and allegories. You may find the latter easier to read before taking on the *Tao Te Ching*.

A recent adaptation of the material by Benjamin Hoff explores the meaning of this philosophy in the *Tao of Pooh*. Using Pooh Bear from A. A. Milne's classic children's story, he interprets the ideas of the *Tao Te Ching* in modern terms. You may find this writing helpful in grasping the meaning of the "watercourse way." Good luck in your study of a Chinese classic that has so much to say to our age 2500 years later.

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