Water Metaphors in *Dao de jing*: A Conceptual Analysis

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This paper focuses on the use of water metaphors in the ancient Chinese text *Dao de jing* (168 BC), which is the foundational text of Daoism and a primary source of modern Chinese ideas about life and politics. The paper analyses how the image of water is used in the text to facilitate the conceptualization of the core philosophical concepts. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). Water is discovered as occupying an essential position in the conceptualization of the Daoist worldview, which is manifested in notions of 道 *dao* and 德 *de*. It demonstrates that a cognitive approach offers an effective way to explore the cognitive basis of the text’s views on the eternal cosmological processing and of the application of morality in the human world.

Keywords: Water Metaphors; *Dao de jing*; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Conceptualization

Introduction

Metaphor is pervasive in our everyday life, in the way we express our ideas, actions, and experiences. Recently, cognitive linguistic research on metaphors reflects a renewed interest in the study of metaphor and focuses the attention on conceptual metaphors, for conceptual metaphors are believed to play a significant role in shaping the process of thinking itself (e.g., Goddard, 2002; Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, 2002; Kövecses, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Reddy, 1979; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1999; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009). It has been argued by cognitive linguists that rather than being just a type of metaphor, conceptual metaphors actually occupy a central position as the most basic set of correspondences within the human conceptual system (e.g., Lakoff, 1987, 1992, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1994). Human thought is deemed as an interactive process and conceptual metaphors are believed to form a basic cognitive structure that permits the understanding of a relatively abstract concept by virtue of a more concrete concept (Gibbs, 1994; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989).

Since the emergence of conceptual metaphor theory, numerous works have sought to explain its working mechanism in the English language (e.g., Lakoff, 1987, 1992, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1994). Much research has been done across different languages into the working mechanisms of metaphorical thinking patterns (e.g., Goddard, 2002; Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, 2002; Kövecses, 2002, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Reddy, 1979; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1999; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009). Metaphor studies in Chinese linguistics, in particular on Chinese philosophical discourse, however, are comparatively rare. Meanwhile, extensive linguistic research has been done in Chinese to explain the significance of figurative language in the ancient Chinese classics (Garrett, 1993a, 1993b; Lu, 1994; Ma, 2000). Only a few studies (e.g., Slingerland, 2003; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009) focus on the workings of metaphors as such. These Chinese linguistic studies offer philosophical insights into the use of metaphorical language that tend to confirm Lakoff and Johnson’s view (1980: p. 180) that human understanding of the world is largely based on people’s interactions with their immediate environment. This perspective is useful in considering the use of conceptual metaphors in Chinese philosophical texts.

In this paper, I focus on water metaphors as they appear in 道德經 *Dao de jing* “the classic of the way and the virtue”, an ancient Chinese philosophical text that has exercised enormous influence on Chinese culture and remains frequently quoted inside and outside of China to this day. It is a foundational text for Daoism as well as for Chinese thought. It can be said that *Dao de jing* includes discussions of various aspects of the meaning of human life and the relationship between human existence and nature; many of its arguments and stances are prescribed with water metaphors. The image of water is believed to be the most outstanding symbol of *dao* (Chan, 163: p. 113) and the metaphors that draw on the image of water convey *Dao de jing*’s main philosophical proposition and political doctrine (Chen & Holt, 2002: p. 155). A conceptual analysis of the water metaphors will be followed by a discussion that focuses on the cognitive basis for *Dao de jing*’s central argument of strength-through-weakness through the physical weakness and the flowing-downwards tendency of water. In addition the image-schematic feature of the cyclical movement of water will be explored, which, I argue, provides a cognitive model to conceptualize Daoist eternity.

Approaching *Dao de jing* from a Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

*Dao de jing* touches upon such issues as cosmology, morality and politics with a wide discussion of the relationship between human beings and nature, as well as the relationship between human beings and society. It describes and discusses various philosophical notions, such as 道 *dao* “the way”, 德 *de* “the virtue”, 真 *zhen* “authenticity” and 無為 *wu wei* “noncoercive action”. It also describes concrete objects, including natural substances and entities, artificial crafts and human body parts,
Next, the analysis turns to metaphors with pool and 水 work. This indicates the special importance of Dao philosophical notions, e.g., the cosmological ideal that is watered in the book (Chen & Holt, 2002: p. 155). In the current study, this text will be analyzed in terms of how these metaphors are conceptually constructed.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory defines conceptual metaphor as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. We draw metaphorical expressions from the source domain, the more concrete sphere, to understand the more abstract domain of knowledge from the target domain (Kövecses, 2002: p. 4). This process of understanding meaning can be described as a set of correspondences that is formed at the conceptual level between the entities in the two domains through cross-domain mappings and metaphorical entailment.

In the analysis, I shall follow two following procedures: first, a lexical semantic and morphological analysis of the metaphorical expressions in the text will be given, accompanied by a discussion of the properties of the source domain concept, based on their descriptions from the text. Second, correspondences between the philosophical connotations of the designated target domain concept and the properties of the source domain concept will be established mainly on the basis of cross-domain mapping and metaphorical entailment.

**Water Metaphors in Dao de jing**

Throughout Dao de jing, the features of the two core philosophical notions, dao and de, are described mostly in terms of 水 shui “water” and water-related images such as 溪 yuan “deep pool” and 谷 gu “mountain valley”. The analysis starts with water-based metaphors that have dao as the target concept. Next, the analysis turns to metaphors with de as the target concept.

**Dao is Water**

In Dao de jing, the term 道 dao appears in the title of the work. This indicates the special importance of dao as a notion in this text. In the text, dao is described in metaphorical language as the ultimate reality which exists prior to the emergence of the physical universe and everything in it (Hansen, 1992: p. 229), and it reflects the mythological consciousness or the cosmological ideal that Dao de jing is upholding. It is found that dao is manifested in a number of water-related imageries, invoking the conceptual metaphor, which is advised here: dao is water.

Dao de jing gives both explicit descriptions of the properties of water and of dao, offering rich contextual information about the two respectively. Water is explicitly described as sustaining the growth of 萬物 wu “everything in the world” but willing to dwell at the lowest places. For this reason, it resembles the features of dao:

In other chapters, it is described as flowing from higher to lower places and the lower it goes, the greater the power it gathers (see example 2); it appears to be soft and weak, but it can overcome the hard and strong (see example 3):

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As noted above, dao can be explained as suggesting some cosmo-relational facts. In the following examples, dao is nonmetaphorically described as the spontaneous origin of vigor and the ultimate reality that gives rise to the physical universe and everything in it (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 143) (example 4). It acquires an ontological dimension of being, vacuous yet sustainable, and cannot be designated by fixed reference (example 5). It is formless (6), vague and indefinite (7); though it appears as weak and gentle (7), it is inexhaustible (8); and, it always returns (9):

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By comparing the metaphorical and nonmetaphorical statements about dao and the descriptions of water, it can be seen that, based on the similarities between the two, the properties of dao in Dao de jing are described in terms of those of water. Dao flows like water; it offers revitalizations like water; and like water it appears to be weak and soft. On the basis of these correspondences, it can be argued that dao is water is the guiding metaphor in Dao de jing. Next the analysis of dao is water shall be presented from the following three aspects: dao in the form of water, dao flows as a river and dao preserves as a deep pool of water.

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1Examples throughout this paper are formatted in two tiers. The first tier presents the Chinese character, based on the richly annotated version of Dao de jing, first published by Zhonghua Book Company, titled The silk text Laozi with annotations (Gao, 1996); the corresponding chapter number is provided. The second tier provides the English free translation based on Ames & Hall (2003).
**Dao in the Form of Water**

Water, as a liquid substance, takes various forms, which I suggest, is mapped onto dao’s formless feature (example 6). They share the ability of going in any direction as can be noticed from the example below:

(10) 道泛呵,其可左右

Dao flows easily which can run in any direction.

道泛 "to flow easily" signifies the movement of water. Water, which cannot be attributed to any fixed form, can thus aid the metaphorical conceptualization of dao as dynamic and transformable.

Water, with its ability to nourish everything on earth, as exemplified in (example 1), can be thought of as a metaphor for the ability to “give rise to continuity” of dao (example 4). Dao is the origin from which everything on earth draws vigor, just as all living beings need water to sustain their growth:

(11) 道者萬物之注也

Dao is the pouring together of all things.

In this example 注 zhu “to pour together”, similar to the character 泛 fan “to flow easily”, can also be argued as evoking the image of water, for they both contain a water radical († on the left of each character). This nourishing feature of water, I suggest, is mapped onto dao’s feature of providing vigor to all things, as metaphorically indicated by 注 zhu “pour”.

Further, beyond the basic mappings mentioned above, as water takes various forms, it occurs everywhere: as clouds in the sky or as the blood inside an animal’s veins. With its omnipresence, water carries a feature of offering nourishment and in this resembles dao, which exerts its influence widely and pervasively.

It can be explained from the physical perception that water, though it appears to be soft compared to other elements found in nature such as stone and metal, becomes great in power when it gathers to a great amount. This feature can also be understood in nature such as stone and metal, becomes great in power when it overflow from its container.

"deep" as an adjective as shown in the following example:

(12) 大邦者下流也

A great state (the state that masters the art of dao) is the lower reaches of water’s downward flow.

**Dao Preserves as a Deep Pool of Water**

In addition to the explicit and indirect reference to dao as water, a liquid substance and a flowing entity, dao is also described as pool of water that is both deep and mysterious: a metaphysical bottomless water container. The linguistic sign that occurs in the text is 萬 yuan “deep pool” as a noun or “deep” as an adjective as shown in the following example:

(13) 道沖而用之有弗盈也

Dao being empty, the use of it cannot be filled up.

So deep, it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening.

So deep, it only seems to persist.

The character 萬 yuan “deep”, according to the oldest Chinese character dictionary, 說文解字 Shuo wen jie zi (Duan, 1815), is formed pictographically. This character is pictographic because of the component on the right, which is comprised of an image of water with two shores on each side. When used as an adjective, it describes the depth of a pool of water. Alternatively, it can be used as a noun to signify a pool of water characterized by its depth (e.g. chapter 36).

The character 冲 chong, which appears in the same example (see also chapters 4 and 45), denotes “empty” and is contrasted to 影 ying “overflowing”. Morphologically speaking, the character 冲 chong “empty” has 中 on the right, which means middle (part). According to 說文解字 Shuo wen jie zi (Duan, 1815), 冲 chong as an adjective means “empty” and is contrasted with 影 ying “overflowing”. The character 影 ying includes a container radical at the bottom part. In 說文解字 Shuo Wen Jie Zi (Duan, 1915), it is explained as a compound word that is made up of two parts: 影 and 影, signifying a filled container. According to the Ancient Chinese Dictionary (Chen, 2009), 影 ying describes the state of something that is overflowing, e.g., water overflowing from its container.

In example 14, adjectives such as 微妙 weimiao “subtle and mysterious”, 玄達 xunda “dark and profound” and 深 shen “deep or profound” are used, which seem to portray dao as some kind of water reservoir characterized by an enormous capacity:

This dictionary summarized six categories of Chinese characters 六書 liu shu: self-explanatory characters, pictographs, picto-phonetic characters, associative compounds, mutually explanatory characters and phonetic loan characters.

This character is translated as “abyss” by Ames & Hall (2003: 83). However this notion “abyss” does not successfully evoke the Chinese term’s connotations of water, the translation “deep pool” is used instead in analysis.
Therefore, it can be said that dao can also be metaphorically conceptualized as 深淵 “deep pool”. 深淵 “deep pool”, which can be image-schematically conceived as a container with a structure characterized by its vacant middle part that can hold water. Perceptually, it remains still all the time; the more water it holds, the darker it gets. Furthermore, the amount of water it can hold depends on the size of the vacant middle part.

Given the metaphorical description of dao as being empty and deep, it can be said that the vacant middle part of a deep pool corresponds to that empty aspect of dao; the imperceptible bottom maps the greatness of dao. Dao, which is also described as being vague and indefinite yet possessing a limitless dynamism, can, therefore, correspond to the capacity of the deep pool.

In summary, the conceptual metaphor dao is water can be seen as providing the conceptual basis for the notion of dao, prescribing the ontological status and features of dao.

De is Water

Besides the cosmological ideal that is suggested through the metaphorical description of dao, in terms of water, morality is frequently discussed through the notion of 德 de, translated as “virtue” or “efficacy”. 德, which also appears in the title, is the central topic in the second half of the original Chinese text: 德道经 de jing, which mainly deals with the social, political and philosophical applications of dao. Moeller suggests that de, as opposed to dao, is the aura of a perfect functioning (2006: p. 43) or to put it another way, of the art of governing everything on earth in accordance with the true way. Ames and Hall (2003: p. 107) out analyze the relationship between dao and de by interpreting de as the character of any particular disposition within the totality of experience, which is determined by dao’s pervasive influence. This can be inferred from chapter 21, in which Dao de jing says that “de is committed to dao alone”. Thus, the notion of de can be thought of as the moral application of the dao (Roberts, 2001: p. 19), i.e., the entity which is in accordance with the true dao. Some of the nonmetaphorical descriptions of de are listed as follows:

| (15) | 上善若水, 有若无, 下善不失德, 以道為法者, 未若水之清。 | 38 |
| (16) | 天地不仁, 以万物為芻狗。 | 5 |
| (17) | 弱者道之用也, 堅者道是為。 | 40 |

It can be found from example 15 that de has a passive and noncompetitive character with great potential and does things by exerting little coercion, displaying a supreme impartiality. In chapter 8, 善 shan is used as an alternative notion of 德 de, translated as “efficacy”, which is explicitly likened to water:

| (18) | 最善若水。 | 8 |

The conceptual metaphor that is advised here is de is water, which is believed to have formed the conceptual basis to the understanding of Daoist morality. With the presentation of de through water, Dao de jing argues that to act without coercion is virtuous. Next, de is water will be explored from the following two aspects: de applies as water and de is water running through a deep valley.

De Applies to Water

By comparing the physical properties of water with the ontological characteristics of de, some metaphorical correspondences can be suggested. As shown in example 15, the most outstanding ontological characteristic of de lies in this manner of concealing rather than displaying. In the cultivation of one’s own character (de), to display what is in accordance with a premediated morality is at the cost of one’s natural moral tendency (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 136). De, instead, should be nonpretentious and noncompetitive, and is marked with a sense of nonworldliness. This nonworldliness of de can be interpreted with reference to water’s tendency to dwell at lower places (see example 1).

As has been pointed out above, de signifies the ideal application of dao. Therefore, as dao functions in the world without imposing any coercion (example 5), de, from a socio-moral perspective, implies that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled should also be featured by noncoerciveness. In chapter 66, Dao de jing explains that no one in the world is able to contend with the rulers who master the art of de because they strive without contentiousness. This application of de by using accommodation rather than coercion (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 182), correspondingly, can be metaphorically understood in terms of water following its natural tendency of flowing downwards.

For Dao de jing, premeditated morality is a sham (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 136). As shown in example 16, the most appropriate manner of conduct in accordance with dao lies in nonhuman or superhuman excellence, for the natural world generated by dao is not “partial to institutionalized morality” (example 16). With this claim, Dao de jing suggests that nature does not run in a way that reflects human expectation. In Dao de jing’s description of water (see example 1), water is said to nourish 萬物 wan wu “everything in the world”, good or bad. Therefore, another mapping correspondence of de and water can be drawn as such: the impartial nonhuman excellence of de is mapped onto water’s trait of giving nourishment without discrimination, and flowing everywhere disdaining nothing.

De is Water Running Through a Deep Valley

Among many of its metaphorical descriptions in the text,
**Discussion**

Water, as a shared target domain concept, I argue, provides a conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between the notions of dao and de. This section will discuss how dao is water and de is water can be argued as jointly establishing the metaphorical entailment. In Dao de jing, it says that weakening is how dao functions (example 9) and the soft and weak vanquish the hard and strong (chapters 36 and 43). As analyzed previously, dao and de are both metaphorically represented by water, yet two different sets of correspondences can be generated in, which features of dao and de are mapped onto different aspects of water. Although dao prescribes the cosmological ideal held by Dao de jing, de deals with the social and moral application of dao, as discovered above, while the noncoercive sense is what they share in common.

In the previous analysis of dao is water and de is water, some points were made to identify the noncoercive sense of dao and de that maps the features of water as soft and weak and flowing downwards without contentiousness. This noncoercive sense can also be argued to map the mountain valley’s feature of accommodating life while exerting little coercion on things that grow inside or run through it.

Many studies show that the noncoerciveness described by Dao de jing is presented in an anti-Confucian manner (e.g., Ames & Hall, 2003; Schwartz, 1985). Dao de jing sidesteps the Confucian moral emphasis on good as opposed to evil and focuses instead on forces at work in nature, which lies in the continuity of process that is featured by the mutual entailing and transformation of opposites. Based on this understanding, the weak and the soft, which is usually treated as the negative, can and ultimately will defeat the strong and the hard.

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Similar to water, which “dwell in places loathed by the crowd” (example 1), the valley is endowed with a willingness to occupy the lower position and it always remains still regardless of the manner of how the water runs through, be it wild or quiet. This low-positioning and stillness can be mapped onto the noncompetitive character and the supreme impartial excellence of de. The valley serves as a water passage by letting things go through without obstruction. Such a characteristic of the mountain valley, abided by the interpretation of de’s noncoercive application through the previous analysis, can also be regarded as corresponding to de’s noncoercive character.

Although lying in the lowest place, the mountain valley, metaphorically and metaphysically presented by Dao de jing, denotes an imperceptible depth and distance. In the text, de is repeatedly referred to as 至德 xuan “dark” and 深 shen “deep” (see example 19 below):

(19) 玄德深矣远矣,与物反矣乃至大顺

Dark de runs so deep and distant only to turn back along with other things to reach the great flow.

(20) 上德若谷,大白如辱

The highest de is like a valley, the most brilliant white seems sulfured.

(21) 為天下谷,恒德乃足

As a valley to the world, your constant de will be ample.

Similarly, water, which “dwells in places loathed by the crowd” (example 1), the valley is endowed with a willingness to occupy the lower position and it always remains still regardless of the manner of how the water runs through, be it wild or quiet. This low-positioning and stillness can be mapped onto the noncompetitive character and the supreme impartial excellence of de. The valley serves as a water passage by letting things go through without obstruction. Such a characteristic of the mountain valley, abided by the interpretation of de’s noncoercive application through the previous analysis, can also be regarded as corresponding to de’s noncoercive character.

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*谷 gu is translated by Ames & Hall as both valley (2003: p. 140) and river gorge (2003: 120). This paper has chosen valley as the English translation for this notion.*
be thought of as metaphorically corresponding to the downward flowing of water.

Eternity as a Continuum

To account for the relationship of the polarities, Dao de jing optimizes the creative possibilities of the opposing elements to allow both of them to transform noncoercively. Based on this understanding, it can be inferred that the focus should not be on the comparison, but should be on the transformational process of the weak and the strong in a manner of noncoercive natural development. Weakness and strength can be thought of as two opposing states. Dao de jing points out several times that dao moves in the manner of 複歸 “to return” (chapters 14 and 28), which suggests that the two opposites operate in a mutually transformative manner. With the dynamic continuity of its circulation and its ability of self-renewal, dao becomes perpetual and eternal (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 83). To create a pictographic interpretation of Daoist eternity first requires us to establish metaphorical correspondences between water and eternity in the sense that they both signify self-renewal.

Dao de jing states that dao works pervasively, without any pause, and this is an ongoing process, without a primary beginning or a termination (e.g. chapters 2, 14, 22 & 25). Based on this understanding, eternity, for Dao de jing, cannot be pictorially viewed as a linear process but should be viewed as circular. It is characterized by the circulation of the opposite polarities, weakness and strength, for instance. The mutual in-taking of the polarities happens in the manner of gradual transformation as suggested by a cyclical conduit which allows circulation.

On the one hand, as discussed previously, dao is indeterminate and vague, yet serves as the origin of the ultimate creative vigor. To go back is thus to regain indeterminacy and vagueness; once it goes back, its potential is renewed. On the other hand, according to our observation of seasonal changes, water can be seen circulating in the world: spring rain revitalizes the plant by pouring vigor into its body; when water is on the ground, it flows to lower places to merge with a larger body of water; once it flows away, new water will fall from the sky.

Thus, the conceptualization of Daoist eternity can be achieved through the projection of the cyclical movement of water. Thus, the image-schematic feature of the latter provides a cognitive model for the former to fit into. This can be confirmed with Ames & Hall’s (2003: p. 116) argument that in Daoist terms the flow of experience has no beginning and no end, for whatever is most enduring is ultimately overtaken in the ceaseless transformation of things (2003: p. 83) and with the opposing categories mutually entailing one another (2003: p. 81), none of them would come to a stop.

Conclusion

Water, as a natural element, can be viewed as a manifestation of softness and powerlessness. When used in metaphors in Dao de jing, water denotes a potential to take new forms and to overthrow the powered because of its softness compared with other natural substance. By analyzing the conceptual metaphor dao is water, dao can be understood more concretely by viewing water as a moving or flowing entity oriented in a certain direction, with an ability to penetrate and to exercise power with subtlety. Through de is water, the notion of 無為 wu wei “noncoercive action” also finds a more physical ground that should be understood as following the way water does. The weakness and yieldingness of water is singled out as the metaphorical basis for the understanding of this ideal ethical conduct.

A conceptual analysis of the water-related metaphors central to the notion of dao and de demonstrate the conceptualization ground for these two concepts through water. It also helps to conceptually explore strength-through-weakness, which is one of the central arguments of Dao de jing, through the image of water flowing downwards to gather its strength. Moreover, strength-through-weakness can be thought of as supporting Dao de jing’s view on the relationship between the two opposites.

To account for the relationship of the polarities, Dao de jing optimizes the creative possibilities of the opposing elements to allow both of them to transform continually, thus permitting the eternal working of the two. A conceptual analysis of image-schematic pattern reflected by the water metaphors can be argued to offer an effective way to visualize this Daoist view on the eternal cosmological process.

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Appendix 1. Translation

[2:8] 先後之相随恒也。
Before and after lend sequence to each other, this is how it works.

[4:1] 道沖，而用之有弗盈也，淵呵，似萬物之宗。湛呵似或存。
Dao being empty, the use of it cannot be filled up. So deep, it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening. So deep, it only seems to persist.

[5:1] 大地不仁。
Nature is not partial to institutionalized morality.

[6:1] 水善利万物而又處众人之所惡，故幾於道。
It is because water benefits everything without contentiousness, dwelling in places loathed by the crowd. That it comes nearest to proper dao.

[10:8] 生而弗有長而弗宰，是謂玄德。
Giving life without managing them, and raising them without lording it over them, this is called de.

[14:5] 繼踵不可名也，復歸於無物，是謂無狀之狀無物之象。
Ever so tangled, it defies discrimination and reverts to indeterminacy. This is what is called the form of the formless and image of indeterminacy.

[14:7] 隨見其後，迎不見其首。
Following behind you will not see its rear; encountering it, you will not see its head.

[15:1] 古之為道者微妙玄達，深不可識。
Those of old who were good at forging dao in the world, subtle and mysterious, dark and profound. Their profundity was beyond comprehension.

[21:1] 孔德之容唯道是从，道之物唯恍唯惚，惚兮恍兮，中有象也。
Those of magnificent de are committed to dao alone. As for the process of dao, it is ever so indefinite and. Though vague and indefinite, there are images within it.

[22:2] 法則盈蔽不新。
Hollow then full, worn then new.

[25:3] 周行而不殆。
All pervading, it does not pause.

[28:5] 為天下谷，恒德乃足，恒德乃足，復歸於樸。
As a valley to the world, your constant de will be ample. With ample constant de, you return to the state of unworked wood.

[34:1] 道泛呵，其可左右。
Dao flows easily which can run in any direction.

[36:6] 柔弱勝剛，魚不可得於淵。
The soft and weak vanquish the hard and strong. Fishes should not relinquish the depths.

[37:1] 道恒無名，萬物將自化。
Dao is really nameless... all things would be able to develop along their own lines.

[38:1] 上德不德是以有德，下德不失德是以無德，上德無為而無以為也。
It is because the most excellent de does not strive to excel, that they are of the highest de, and it is because the least excellent do not leave off striving to excel that they have no de. Persons of the highest de neither do things coercively nor would they have any motivation for doing so.

[40:1] 反者道之動也，弱者道之用也。
Returning is how dao moves; weakening is how dao functions.

[41:9] 上德若谷，大白如辱。

The highest de is like a valley, the most brilliant white seems sullied.

Dao gives rise to continuity (one-ness), continuity gives rise to difference (two-ness), difference gives rise to plurality (three-ness), and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (ten-thousand things).

The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the hardest things.

What is fullest seems empty, yet using it does not use it up.

To not only treat the able as bale, but to treat the unable as able too.

What has been well-planted cannot be uprooted, what is embraced tightly will not escape one’s grasp.

A great state (the state that masters the art of dao) is the lower reaches of water’s downward flow.

Dao is the flowing together of all things.

Dark de runs so deep and distant only to turn back along with other things to reach the great flow.

What enables the rivers and the seas to be king over all the valleys is that they are good at staying lower than them.

It is because they (the virtuous ruler) strive without contentiousness that no one in the world is able to contend with them.

Those who are good at employing others place themselves beneath them; that is called having noncontentious de.

Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water and yet in attacking what is hard and strong, there is nothing that can surpass it.