

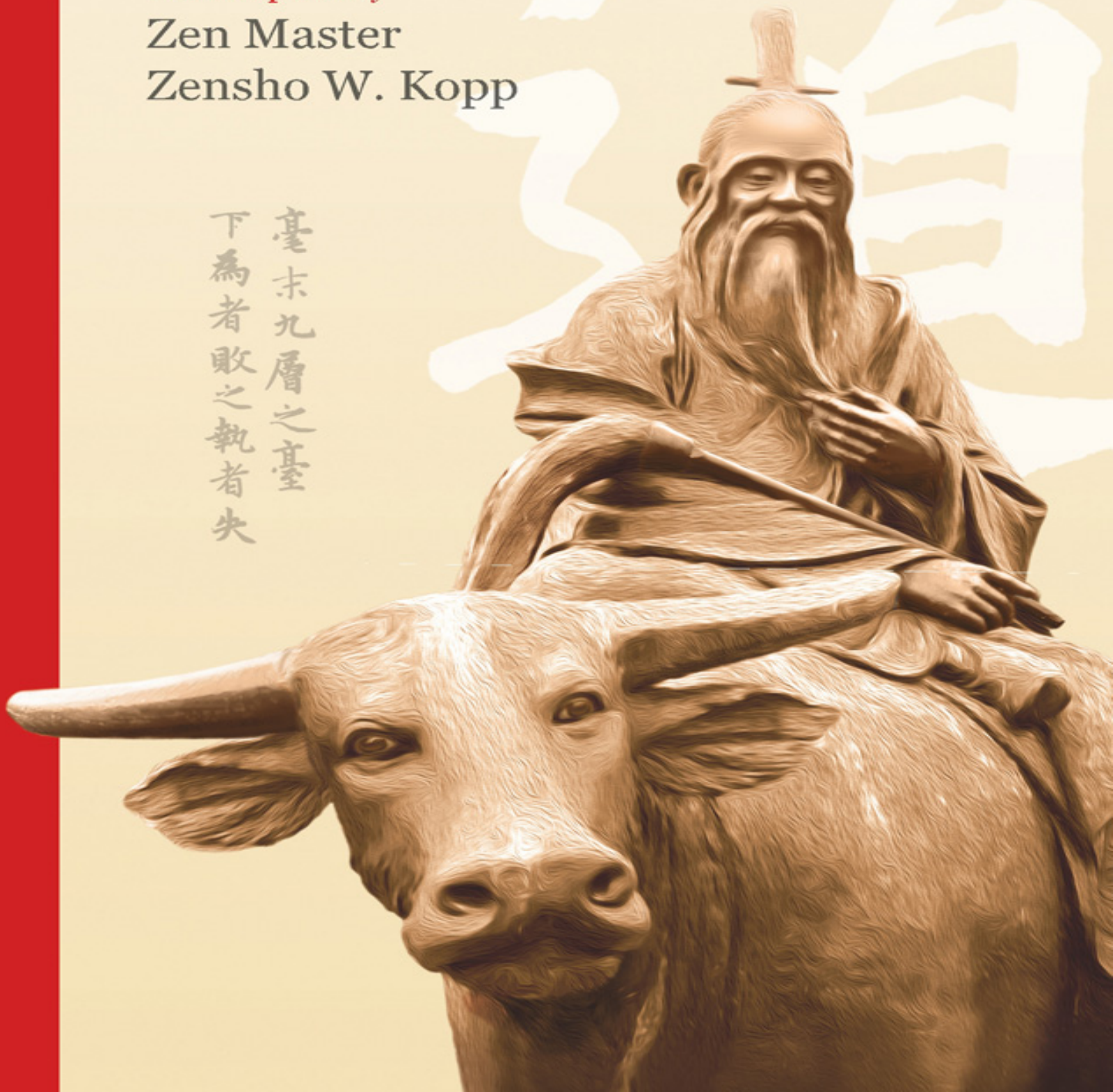
Lao-tse

TAO TE KING

The book of Tao and spiritual force

Transcription by
Zen Master
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毫末九層之臺
下為者敗之執者失



ZENSHO W. KOPP is one of the most significant western Zen Masters of the present.

He is the direct Dharma successor to Zen Master Soji Enku and the author of a number of books on Zen and Taoism. Zen Master Zensho instructs a large group of students and directs the Tao Chan Zen Center in Wiesbaden, Germany.

The words of the Chinese sage Lao-tse are counted among the inexhaustible sources of eternal wisdom. In a language of incomparable imagery he speaks of the Tao, the divine origin of all existence, and its effect in man as spiritual force.

In radiantly clear aphorisms, like perfectly polished gemstones, the Tao Te King portrays the deep affinity of man with the cosmos. It aims to lead him back to the original oneness with the Tao, and thus into harmony with the all-embracing wholeness of existence, manifest as the unity of all beings.

Lao-tse, the Old Master, came into this world when it was his time. When his time was fulfilled he left. Regarding the one who knows of his time and is certain of the fulfilment; coming and going, joy and suffering no longer have power over him.

Chuang-tse (4th. century B.C.)

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Preface

The Tao Te King is one of the most significant and most translated books of world literature and one can hardly imagine today that anyone interested in Eastern religion and philosophy would be unaware of this book.

The words of the Chinese sage Lao-tse are counted among the inexhaustible sources of eternal wisdom. In a language of incomparable imagery he speaks in his Tao Te King of the Tao, the divine origin of all existence, and its spiritual force in man. In radiantly clear aphorisms, like perfectly polished gemstones, the work portrays the deep affinity of man with the cosmos. It aims to lead him back to the original oneness with the Tao, and so into harmony with the all-embracing wholeness of existence, manifest as the unity of all beings.

The version at hand took its impulse from the wish to convey the mystical expressiveness of the Tao Te King, whilst strictly adhering to the original sense, and thus to allow a deeper insight. Furthermore, it was important to me to formulate the work in a clear way which comes as close as possible to the expressive, simple language found in the Chinese original.

In recent times there have been numerous attempts to freely convey the Tao Te King in an everyday, verbose form in order to make it easily understandable. However; all of these are predestined to fail since the Tao Te King is not suitable for such modernisation attempts, regardless of how well-meant they may be.

Every attempt to linguistically smooth out the text and to lengthen it through additions inevitably leads to a falsification of the deeply mystical predications of Lao-tse and draws them down to the level of profanity. Such

violations of the text are not only in complete contradiction to the mystical spirit of the Tao Te King but are ultimately extremely embarrassing and make absolutely no sense. To water down the text in such a way, as though it were a product of the modern esoteric wave, means tearing the work from its historic framework and leaving it bereft of its vivacious originality.

As to the language of the Tao Te King, it is arcane, profound, and highly symbolic, so that the work directs itself at the spiritual intuition of the reader. Therefore, its mystical content only reveals itself in its full depth to the inner eye of mystical contemplation. This means that it can only be fully grasped meditatively, beyond logical thinking. Thus by connecting heart and intellect, intuition and logic build the full basis for comprehending the Tao Te King.

And so, whoever takes this book to hand should be aware that its contents cannot be understood solely by means of discriminating, conceptual thought. Consequently, one should not let oneself become discouraged when time is required for a deeper understanding.

The more the reader becomes intimate with the book and reads it with his heart, the more Lao-tse's treasures of oracular wisdom will bear fruit and the Tao Te King will become a friend for life for him.

Wiesbaden, May 2014

Zensho W. Kopp

Introduction

The author of the Tao Te King must seem concealed and mysterious to us, just like the Tao of which he speaks. Chinese tradition has it that Lao-tse was born in the sixth century B.C. in a village called Khü-yen, and seemingly reached a very old age of well over a hundred years. In the "Historical Chronicles" (Chin. Shih-chi) of Szuma Chien, an important Chinese historical work from the first century B.C., it is written:

"Lao-tse, the Old Master, lived in unison with the Tao and its spiritual force. He strove to remain concealed and unremarkable. For a long time he lived in Tschou, but as he saw that Tschou was in the process of decay he mounted a water buffalo and rode off. On arriving at the border pass, he encountered the border guard Yin Hsi, who recognised the master and begged him to leave at least something in writing for future generations.

Thereupon, Lao-tse wrote a book containing over five thousand Chinese characters in which he expressed his thoughts on Tao and its spiritual force. Subsequently, riding on his buffalo, he departed. No one knows where he ended."

Even when the author of the Tao Te King remains concealed from us in the shadows of history, the content and composition of his work bear witness to his personality all the more emphatically. Needless to say, there is no lack of critical voices who endeavour to question the historical existence of the old master or even try to associate him with the realm of myths and legends. However; as early as

1910, the sinologist Richard Wilhelm said of Lao-tse in his commentary on the Tao Te King:

“As with all things historical, the biographical aspect dissolves too for the mystic into meaningless superficiality. And yet, from these aphorisms at hand, an original and inimitable personality speaks to us – in our opinion the best proof of its historicity. But one must have a feeling for such things, one cannot argue over them.”

Whilst taking the Tao Te King, literally: “The book of Tao and Spiritual Force”, to hand, one will promptly ask oneself: what is Tao?

Western interpreters translate the Chinese symbol “Tao” to: way, being, world-order, sense, reason, track, leader of the universe, just to mention a few. It must be said here, though, that every translation of the word, however well-minded it may be, only illuminates one aspect of the Tao but does not make the Tao itself come alive. For whatever names and circumlocutions we may ascribe to the inconceivable, and thus unspeakable origin of all being, in the end they are but our own limited conceptions and images of the Tao and never the Tao itself. Tao is intangible and indefinable, since defining means setting limits. It is a term for something that eludes all conceptualisation. All attempts to force the Tao into conceptual forms are as if one would attempt to capture heaven in a net. At the very start of the first chapter Lao-tse therefore says:

The speakable Tao
is not the eternal Tao.
The mentionable name
is not the eternal name.

Furthermore, in the sixth century, the Chinese Zen master Huai Jang said, “Everything that I could tell of it would fall short of the mark.”