



THE
RECOVERY
OF *love*

PART THREE: PATHWAYS

PAPER NINE

*The Tao
and the I Ching*

A Series of Discussion Papers by

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In exploring possible pathways, we now come to two ancient but utterly relevant teachings for our troubled time: The Tao and the I Ching.

The Tao

I have several translations of The Tao and two of my favourites are the translation by Stephen Mitchell¹ and the one by Ursula K. Le Guin,² (who we have already met in Paper 6). Others that I have enjoyed are those by Ellen M. Chen,³ which is scholarly with lots of notes and comments, and, most recently, one by Rosemarie Anderson, which is of special interest to me since she sets the Tao within the realm of the Divine Feminine.

In Mitchell's translation, the opening stanza of the Tao Te Ching, says:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.⁵

And Ursula Le Guin's version of this is:

The way you can go
isn't the real way.
The name you can say
isn't the real name.⁶

At once I am caught off guard, for my own Western culture insists on naming and knowing, on possessing and controlling. What can I do?

Well, I can listen and explore.

For me, The Tao is the most wonderful expression of wholeness and connection, of relationship, and it is a teaching that honours the darkness, which Ursula Le Guin calls the mystery and the hidden. Stephen Mitchell translates it as follows:

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.⁷

By contrast to the Christian, and indeed the Quaker, emphasis on The Light, darkness as the gateway to all understanding is exactly what I have found, and to find it expressed in this way is very reassuring. Rosemarie Anderson translates it as follows:

Dark beyond dark is
The door to all subtleties.⁸

Dark beyond dark. That's it.

The Tao is thought to have been written down in China by Lao-Tzu some time in the last five hundred years BC. Nothing much is known about Lao-Tzu, but he was probably the archive-keeper of one of the small kingdoms of his time,⁹ and he may have been an older contemporary of Confucius. Some regard the verses as a treatise on the art of government,¹⁰ whilst others find them to be more of a philosophy of life. In any event, The Tao offers a way of perceiving ourselves and our relationships with each other that is quite contrary to present Western culture. It is not, as is sometimes supposed, simply a treatise on not-doing, not at all, rather it is a teaching of doing in ways that are integrated and selfless, where “we can't tell the dancer from the dance.”¹¹ There is a softness and a gentleness to the teachings, but also a strength and a firmness, and of all the great world religions, says Stephen Mitchell, “the teaching of Lao-Tzu is by far the most female.”¹² Here it is in his description of the Tao:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:
empty yet inexhaustible,
it gives birth to infinite worlds.¹³

And Rosemarie Anderson, who, in her early thirties, travelled

to Asia and studied the etymology of Chinese characters, says this:

To my surprise, I discovered that the Tao was profoundly *feminine*! Never could I have predicted that because, in the English translations I read, the Tao is commonly referred to as 'It' throughout the poems. How could so many translators, almost all men, not have noticed that the Tao is consistently referred to as 'mother', 'virgin', and 'womb of creation', all of which are clearly feminine and hardly gender neutral?... I could not possibly refer to the Tao as anything other than 'She'.¹⁴

And later, in a section titled 'The Divine Feminine Tao', she says:

The tenderness and hiddenness of the Tao signal Her Feminine nature... Not only is the Tao's nature uniquely feminine, but creation is described as a solo act rooted in the immortal void, the dark womb. Endlessly returning to source, all creation passes through her womb and then into the world.¹⁵

The book of the Tao is composed of eighty-one 'chapters', each of which is made up of a small number of short verses or stanzas, and the text presents verse after verse that challenge our present instrumental and controlling mode of being. It suggests a more receptive mode, a discipline perhaps, of surrender and attentiveness:

Therefore the Master
acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Things arise and she lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
acts but does not expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever.¹⁶

Leadership is said to require a care of those who are led, without the pomp of authority. It is service to others: “Do your work and then step back. The only path to serenity.” It offers virtues of simplicity and generosity

In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep it simple.
In conflict be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.¹⁸

Another feature of the text is the apparent paradox in which opposites are resolved into complementarities:

There is a time for being ahead,
a time for being behind;
a time for being in motion,
a time for being at rest;
a time for being vigorous,
a time for being exhausted;
a time for being safe,
a time for being in danger.¹⁹

Or these:

If you want to shrink something,
you must first let it expand.
If you want to get rid of something,
you must first allow it to flourish.
If you want to take something,
you must first allow it to be given.
This is called the subtle perception
of the way things are.

The soft overcomes the hard.
The slow overcomes the fast.²⁰

The Tao never does anything,
yet through it everything is done.²¹

Yielding not dominating is the way of the Tao,²² it nourishes
and completes all things.²³ As Ursula Le Guin has it:

The Way is hidden
in its namelessness.
But only the Way
begins, sustains, fulfils.²⁴

And there is always integration: for when male and female
combine, all things achieve harmony. I note that these words are
akin to the later gnostic teachings in the *Gospel of Thomas*, that
“when you make the female into a single One so that the male is
not the male and the female is not the female...then you will enter
the Kingdom.”²⁶

The Tao is the mother of all things:

The Tao gives birth to all beings,
nourishes them, maintains them,
cares for them, comforts them, protects them,
takes them back to itself,
creating without possessing,
acting without expecting,
guiding without interfering.
That is why love of the Tao
is the very nature of things.²⁷

And she is at ease:

The Tao is always at ease.
[She] overcomes without competing,
answers without speaking a word,
arrives without being summoned,
accomplishes without a plan.²⁸

The Tao is full of compassion:

I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.²⁹

In these ways, and of course in so much more, this ancient teaching directly challenges those things we have some to believe to be true, those things that have shaped our language and our ways of being: consumption and greed give way to simplicity; pace and competition give way to patience; control and aggression give way to compassion; opposites are resolved in their complementarity; the soft overcomes the hard.

And for the purpose of this series of papers, moving on from what we discovered in Paper 7, partnership and relational being, The Tao offers another language, a language of integration, connection and relationship. And as I read it, in its many versions, I begin to see that the Tao is Love. There is nothing that can be said about the Tao since the Tao is beyond words, and the same can be said of Love. In such a place, we come to Silence, resting there and watching Love flow through us. For me, Love is the energy of the Tao, or rather it is the movement of the Tao, from and to. Or... But then we are caught once more in words.

So, if now we are told by science that everything that is is interconnected and part of a whole, our world, the universe, the cosmos, then the whole is the Tao and the fabric of the interconnection is Love, the weave, the flow of waters from a divine spring, running through streams and rivers back to the ocean of Oneness. From Oneness comes Twoness, the *yin* and *yang* that form the apparent opposition before the coming of Threeness, reconciliation through Love, and the arising of all that is:

Man follows the earth.
Earth follows the universe.
The universe follows the Tao.
The Tao follows only itself.³⁰

To which I would say:

And the following is Love,
And that which follows is Love.

Only in Love can the Path of the Tao be discerned, be known, and, as a wave, become manifest in the energy of life, expressed in Nature. Look all around you. Listen to the Silence in the night, for it is from the Darkness that Light arises. And as soon as Love is named it has gone, back into the darkness from whence it came. Following on from what we discovered in Paper 2, and inspired by the Tao, I would say this:

Follow with love,
but do not follow.
Love is always waiting for you.
There in the darkness.

Make some tea.
Offer it to a friend,
and set it down.
Ask her:
“Would you like cake?”

Everything is Love.
And Love is nowhere to be seen.

The tide is rising and falling.
The moon grows large and small.
The sun arises from the East,
and sets in the West.
The breeze runs through the reed bed.

Love at work.

The I Ching

I began to write this on an auspicious day, the 1st February, the Celtic feast day of Imbolc, when the first lambs are born and when snowdrops and aconites are in flower. Somewhat awkwardly,

I think, this became the Christian festival of Candlemas, but in the ancient Chinese teaching of the I Ching, this time of the year is represented by the twenty-fourth Hexagram, *Fu*, which means Turning Point, the time in which the light returns. The nurturing darkness of Winter gives birth once more to the light, and movement begins from the feminine qualities of *yin* to the masculine qualities of *yang*.³¹ But, as I say this, I must also say that beyond these notions of the feminine and the masculine is an ungendered realm of qualities of which I will speak later. And please note that I do not claim scholarship. My writing is not of this kind. At my age, I don't have the muscle tone for scholarship. Rather I want to share what I have come across and what I have made of it, what it has said to me, in the hope that you will set off on your own adventures, perhaps be tempted to make your own enquiries and, no doubt, come to your own conclusions.

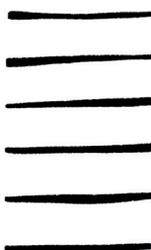
So here we are in February as the darkness begins to bring forth the light. This is a special time of the year for me, for all those years ago I was born from the darkness of my mother's belly into the darkness of early December, as the dying light moved towards the Winter solstice. And then, before I was one month old, the year had turned, as the darkness once more began to give birth to the light. Perhaps this is why I have come to feel that darkness is misunderstood. In many cultures and, especially in many Western religious teachings, it is described as a place we should move away from, a lower realm that we should transcend in order to reach the higher realm of light. It is even assumed to be associated with evil and, of course, with death. This is not how it is for me, and I note that in the Celtic tradition, the day, or the month, or the year, always started in darkness – the evening gave rise to the following day, the dark phase of the moon gave birth to the new moon, the feast of Samhain, on the first of November, began the year as the light yielded to darkness. In this way, everything began by entering the darkness, and the light always arose out of darkness. This seems to me to be evidently true. It is in the darkness that healing and transformation take place. The seed falls into the earth as the light gives way to darkness, and in the darkness it is transformed into a shoot, which remains in the nurturing darkness of the soil ready to come forth as the light returns. It is not the light but the darkness

that gives it birth.

Over time, in the last millennium or so BC, the teachings of the I Ching were systematised into a series of trigrams and hexagrams, based upon solid and broken lines, the solid line being *yang* (masculine, odd numbers) and the broken line being *yin* (feminine, even numbers). These formations were interpreted and used for guidance and divination. Remember, at this point, that the reference to masculine and feminine is not to be taken as a gendered separation of male and female. These masculine and feminine qualities are found in all of us, men and women alike. The masculine, or *yang*, qualities are referred to as Heaven and the feminine, or *yin*, qualities as Earth, the former being regarded as creative, or rather becoming manifest, and the latter as receptive. By way of integration, the manifesting *yang* falls down and into the receptive *yin*, and the *yin* rises up towards the *yang* – in all of us and in all that is.

The hexagrams are constructed by either the casting of yarrow sticks or the casting of three coins to decide whether the lines are to be odd or even. In the casting of the coins, which is the method I have used, heads might be taken as a three and tails as a two, and the lines are combinations of the count of the casting of the coins, giving the necessary odd or even totals.

The first hexagram of the I Ching is *Ch'ien*,³³ which is said to be The Creative. It is represented as six solid lines, one on top of the other, two trigrams one above the other:



It is an expression of *yang* and represents the primal power, which is light-giving, active, strong and of the spirit. It is conceived as motion, both in the cosmos and in each one of us. In the coming

together of the two trigrams, its image is Heaven above and below.

The course of the Creative alters and shapes beings until each attains its true specific nature, then it keeps them in conformity with Great Harmony.³⁴

In its qualities of 'sublime' and 'success' it is connected to Love:

To sublimity, which, as the fundamental principle, embraces all other attributes, it links love. To the attribute success are linked the mores, which regulate and organise the expression of love and thereby makes them successful.³⁵

And through 'furthering' and 'perseverance' it is connected to justice and wisdom.³⁶ This link between love, justice and wisdom is of great importance to us at a time when justice is so often separated from love and wisdom and all too often expressed assertively as little more than a bundle of rights.

Because the first line (the bottom line) of *Ch'ien* is a nine (cast as three heads in the casting of the coins), it is what is termed a change line, which means that after the first divination or guidance it has then to be read again, this time with a broken, feminine, line at the bottom.



Now it is *Kou*,³⁷ Coming to Meet, which indicates that although, at high Summer, the darkness of *yin*, has been altogether eliminated, "furtively and unexpectedly"³⁸ it begins to rise again from within and below. Eventually, as the number of broken *yin* lines of darkness increase in number from below, all the solid lines

of light are replaced, and we return to the darkness of Winter. This hexagram is now made of six broken lines and is the second hexagram, *K'un*,³⁹ which is called The Receptive:



Now, it represents the utter dark, yielding, receptive power of *yin*. Its image is Earth.

However, the first line of *K'un* is again a change line, being made of three twos, and so when it is reversed it becomes *Fu*, which is called The Turning Point.⁴⁰



Fu is called The Turning Point because now the time of utter darkness is past, and the light is returning. In December-January, the days lengthen, shown as the light of *yang* begins to increase from the bottom of the hexagrams upwards.

Between the depths of Winter and high Summer, or in the movement from utter darkness to full light, we have in-between times. In February-March, when the light is moving upwards and the darkness is declining, we have the hexagram *T'ai*,⁴¹ judged to be a time of Peace. This is a time when the influences are said to be

in harmony.⁴²



In August-September, we see in the hexagram *P'i*,⁴³ the upward movement of darkness, which is said to be a time of standstill and decline, a time that is judged to be Stagnation, a time when it is said that heaven and earth are out of communion.⁴⁴



At first sight, and worryingly for me, it would seem that light is taken as being more propitious than darkness. For if this was not the case, why would *P'i*, Hexagram 12, moving to darkness, be more harshly presented than *T'ai*, Hexagram 11, moving to light – why would one be called Stagnation and the other Peace?

But perhaps there is another reading and what follows is no more than my own interpretation of the hexagrams as described by Richard Wilhelm and C. F. Baynes but now linked to the Celtic wheel of the year – which I have described in my story 'The King Who Lost his Memory' set out in the Appendix to *Love and the Divine Feminine* – which is evident in the ever-flowing, and seasonal, a movement from darkness to light and from light to darkness.

Consider this.

Full light, the summer solstice (Hexagram 1), begins to give way to rising darkness (Hexagrams 44 and 33). At the autumn equinox (Hexagram 12) there is a momentary pause. But it is only momentary as the darkness continues to rise until, at winter solstice (Hexagram 2) it has entirely received or taken in the weakening light. In this state, in this darkness and within the earth, the light rests, is healed and transformed so that as it rises (Hexagrams 24 and 19) and the new shoots begin to appear, snowdrops and crocus, until at the spring equinox (Hexagram 11) all is once more in balance, reinvigorated and full of the potential for its flourishing. Thus, it proceeds with rising light (Hexagrams 34 and 43) until we come, again, to the summer solstice. From there, once more, it returns.

Perhaps this movement of darkness and light is what brings life, born in the incarnation of light through the belly of Mother Earth. Without this, the creative or manifesting light of Heaven cannot be brought to life on Earth, is unable to be born and reborn.

But however this might be, we must see that, at all times, the feminine and masculine energies are moving, never static. As the Buddha said: coming to be coming to be, ceasing to be ceasing to be. By way of example, this interplay of the feminine and masculine is shown in the sixteenth hexagram, Yü, which is called Enthusiasm⁴⁵



Here, the feminine *yin* is held in the fourth line from the bottom by the masculine *yang*, which binds the feminine together, but is yet supported by the feminine. The upper trigram is thunder, and the lower the earth, so the energy of thunder arises from the midst of receptivity of the earth:

When, at the beginning of summer, thunder – electrical energy – comes rushing forth from the earth again, and the first thunderstorm refreshes nature, a prolonged state of tension is resolved. Joy and relief make themselves felt.... The enthusiasm of the heart expresses itself involuntarily in a burst of song, in dance and rhythmic movement of the body. From immemorial times the inspiring effort of the invisible sound that moves all hearts, and draws them together, has mystified mankind.⁴⁶

In this way the sky and the Earth are connected in the lightning and the thunder, the predominant darkness of the feminine and of the Earth uniting with a single charge of light, the masculine, and from this great energy, enthusiasm, erupts. This kind of mysterious and yet evident integration of the masculine and feminine energies, so difficult to describe in Western language, is expressed throughout the I Ching and challenges us to question all that we know about the apparent opposition of the feminine and the masculine, about the apparent opposition of darkness and light. In a way, it releases us from the limitations of our language and offers us myriad possibilities for integration. Both darkness and light come alive.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not yet ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing.

Whisper of running streams. And winter lightening,
The wild strawberry unseen and the wild strawberry,

T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*, The Four Quartets.⁴⁷

The next task, for me, not here but in time to come, will be to express this movement of darkness and light without any reference of ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’; to find an ungendered form of

Endnotes

1. Lao-Tzu, *Tao Tè Ching: The Book of the Way*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, Kyle Cathie, 1988.
2. Lao-Tzu, *Tao Tè Ching: A Book About The Way and the Power of the Way*, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin, Shambala, 1998.
3. *The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation with Commentary*, translated by Ellen M. Chen, Paragon House, 1989.
4. *The Divine Feminine Tao Te Ching: A New Translation & Commentary*, translated by Rosemarie Anderson, Inner Traditions, 2021.
5. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, Chapter 1.
6. Op cit, Ursula K. Le Guin, Chapter 1.
7. Op cit. Stephen Mitchell, Chapter 1.
8. Op cit, Rosemarie Anderson, Chapter 1.
9. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, vii.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. ix.
13. Ibid. Chapter 6.

14. Op cit, Rosemarie Anderson, 3.
15. Ibid. 11.
16. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, Chapter 2.
17. Ibid. Chapter 9.
18. Ibid. Chapter 8.
19. Ibid. Chapter 29.
20. Ibid. Chapter 36.
21. Ibid. Chapter 37.
22. Ibid. Chapter 40.
23. Ibid. Chapter 41.
24. Op cit, Ursula K. Le Guin, Chapter 41.
25. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, Chapter 42.
26. *The Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Jean-Yves Leloup and translated into English by Joseph Rowe, Inner Traditions, 1986, 19.
27. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, Kyle Cathie, 1988. Chapter 51.
28. Ibid. Chapter 73.

29. Ibid. Chapter 67.
30. Op cit, Stephen Mitchell, Chapter 25.
31. There are a number of editions of the I Ching but the one that I have used is the one translated by Richard Wilhelm and translated into English by C. F. Baynes. It was first published in 1950, but my copy is a later edition that was published in 1997. It has a Preface by Carl Jung.
32. This story is told as the story of The King Who Lost His Memory in the Appendix of my book, *Love and the Divine Feminine*, published by Panacea Books in 2020.
33. *The I Ching*, translated by Richard Wilhelm, translated into English by C. F. Baynes, Bollingen Series XIX, Third Edition 1967, twenty-seventh printing, 1997, 3, Hexagram 1.
34. Ibid.5.
35. Ibid. 5-6.
36. Ibid. 6.
37. Ibid. 170, Hexagram 44.
38. Ibid. 170.
39. Ibid 10, Hexagram 2.
40. Ibid. 97, Hexagram 24.
41. Ibid. 48, Hexagram 11.

42. Ibid. 48.
43. Ibid. 52, Hexagram 12.
44. Ibid. 52.
45. Ibid. 67.
46. Ibid. 68.
47. *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, Faber and Faber, 2012.