The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless (wu) is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.

Ever desireless (wu-yu), one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.

These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness
The gate to all mystery.

the unnameable dao  

problem with naming
Confucius emphasized the “rectification of names”
Laozi begins by emphasizing the nameless

wu — without, free of, not having, empty of, non-being, non-existence

a mind free of thought (wu-yu)
yu  thought constructs, mental patterns, desires
wu-yu  non-desire, objectless desire, a desire which does not seek to possess

other wu-forms prominent in the text:
wuwei  non-action, non-coercive action, unforced action
actions that are spontaneous (ziran)
wuzhi  non-knowledge, unwisdom, unfixed wisdom?

xuantong — deep and mysterious, enigmatic unity
miao — essence, mystery, wonder
zhong — all, everything
2

Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.
All can know good as good only because there is evil.
Therefore having and not having arise together.
Difficult and easy complement each other.
Long and short contrast each other;
Voice and sound harmonize each other
Front and back follow one another.

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

3

Not exalting the gifted prevents quarreling.
Not collecting treasures prevents stealing.
Not seeing desirable things prevents confusion of the heart.
The wise therefore rule by emptying hearts and stuff ing bellies, by weakening ambitions and strengthening bones.
If men lack knowledge (wuzhi) and desire (wuyo), then clever people will not try to interfere.
If nothing is done (wuwei), then all will be well.

4

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

5

Heaven and earth are impartial.
They see the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
The wise are impartial,
They see the people as straw dogs.
The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.
The shape changes but not the form'
The more it moves, the more it yields.
More words count less.
Hold fast to the center.

The oscillation of yin and yang is the movement of dao

male
brightness
something
doing something
knowledge
full
above
before
moving
big
strong
hard
straight

female
darkness
nothing
doing nothing
ignorance
empty
below
behind
still
small
weak
soft
bent

the wise (shengren) rules by emptying/stilling/calming heart-mind

Dao Chong (dao is empty, or like an empty cup)
introduction of the theme of emptiness
the dao is empty in the sense that it cannot be exhausted
the inexhaustible cup
no names can capture it
Ivanhoe's translation:
“Heaven and earth are not benevolent (ren)”

heaven (tian) is treated in the Daodejing
as the impersonal forces of nature
or the regular operations of the natural world
tian is often used as an abbreviation for

Graham has “Heaven and earth are ruthless . . . the sage is ruthless” in
treating the people as straw dogs (Disputers of the Tao, p. 231)
nature treats everything the same
human beings are not singled out as special
sages model nature in being not ren
in treating all people the same
6
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.

7
Heaven and earth last forever. Why do heaven and earth last forever? They are unborn, So ever live. The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead. He is detached, thus at one with all. Through selfless action, he attains fulfillment.

8
The highest good is like water. Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places men reject and so is like the Dao. In dwelling, be close to the land. In meditation, go deep in the heart. In dealing with others, be gentle and kind. In speech, be true. In ruling, be just. In daily life, be competent. In action, be aware of the time and the season. No fight. No blame.

9
Better stop short than fill to the brim. Oversharpen the blade, and the edge will soon blunt. Amass a store of gold and jade, and no one can protect it. Claim wealth and titles, and disaster will follow. Retire when the work is done. This is the way of heaven.

10
Carrying body and soul and embracing the one, Can you avoid separation? Attending fully and becoming supple, Can you be as a newborn baby? Washing and cleansing the primal vision, Can you be without stain? Loving all men and ruling the country, here “attending fully” is, as Ivanhoe has it, “concentrating your qi”

The valley spirit is called xuanpin xuan (mysterious, profound, secret, dark) pin (woman, mother, womb) the “hidden creator,” the enigmatic or “dark female” men tiandi—gate of Heaven and Earth the image of the “portal” or “gateway” of the female used as analogy for the source or the “root” of Heaven and earth (or all things)

now the metaphor of water is introduced Alan Watts’s book on Daoism bears the title The Watercourse Way some advice for the good life: “always knowing where to be, committing ourselves utterly in our relationships, being generous in our transactions, making good on what we say, being successful both in service and in governance, and seizing the moment.” [Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, The Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), p.88] “go deep in the heart” “In hearts, the good lies in depth” (Ivanhoe)

xīn heart/mind shān good/best, excellent yuán deep, profound, still like deep water

the dao of tian is to stop short before overdoing it

“much of the Daodejing can be read as a metaphor for breathing exercises” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 90)
Can you be without cleverness?  
Opening, and closing the gates of heaven,  
Can you play the role of woman?  
Understanding and being open to all things,  
Are you able to do nothing (wu-wei)?  

Giving birth and nourishing,  
Bearing yet not possessing,  
Working yet not taking credit,  
Leading yet not dominating,  
This is the Primal Virtue (de).

The five colors blind the eye.  
The five tones deafen the ear.  
The five flavors dull the taste.  
Racing and hunting madden the mind.  
Precious things lead one astray.  
Therefore the sage is guided by what he feels and not by what he sees.  
He lets go of that and chooses this.

Accept disgrace willingly.  
Accept misfortune as the human condition.  
What do you mean by “Accept disgrace willingly”?  
Accept being unimportant.  
Do not be concerned with loss or gain.  
This is called “accepting disgrace willingly.”  
What do you mean by “Accept misfortune as the human condition”?  
Misfortune comes from having a body.  
Without a body, how could there be misfortune?  
Surrender yourself humbly; then you can be trusted to care for all things.  
Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things.

Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form.  
Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound.  
Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible.  
These three are indefinable;  

Graham on wuwei:  
“This term, which goes back to Confucius, is often translated by such innocuous phrases as ‘non-action’ to avoid giving the impression that Taoist recommend idleness, but it seems better to keep the paradoxical force of the Chinese expression. Wei is ordinary human action, deliberated for a purpose, in contrast to the spontaneous processes of nature which are ‘so of themselves.’ Man takes pride in distinguishing himself from nature by his purposive action; Lao-tzu by a classic reversal describes the behaviour of the sage as Doing Nothing” (Disputers of the Tao, 232). wuzhi also appears but gets lost in translation

the key to all procreation or creativity  
(giving birth and nourishing)  
is producing but not possessing  
this is the enigmatic or profound de

the value of emptiness  
it is the center hole, the emptiness (wu) that makes it useful  
the empty hub of a wheel  
the emptiness of a clay vessel

one may profit from what is present  
but what is not present is more valuable

the five colors, tones, flavors refers to conventional tastes  
what is important is to prevent the vital qi  
from being dissipated through the maddening rush of society

Ivanhoe: “sages are for the belly and not for the eye”  
the belly is easily satiated but the eye always wants more

Ivanhoe: “Revere calamity as you revere your own body”  

a number of stories in the Zhuangzi develop this theme of accepting misfortune as being key to attuning to the dao

this last verse an echo of Yang Zhu  
Ames and Hall’s translation:  
“Thus those who value the care of their own persons more than running the world can be entrusted with the world. And those who begrudge their persons as though they were the world can be put in charge of the world” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 93).  
this passage will also occur in the Zhuangzi

the dao is again ungraspable and unnameable  
indefinable
Therefore they are joined in one. 
From above it is not bright; 
From below it is not dark:
An unbroken thread beyond description.  
It returns to nothingness. 
The form of the formless,  
The image of the imageless. 
It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.  
Stand before it and there is no beginning, 
Follow it and there is no end. 
Stay with the ancient Dao, 
Move with the present. 
Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Dao.

The formless form
the image of no thing
thread of the *dao* is the ability to know the ancient beginnings
i.e., the origin of things out of emptiness

The ancient masters were subtle, mysterious, profound, responsive.
The depth of their knowledge is unfathomable. 
Because it is unfathomable,
All we can do is describe their appearance. 
Watchful, like men crossing a winter stream.
Alert, like men aware of danger.
Courteous, like visiting guests.
Yielding, like ice about to melt.
Simple, like uncarved blocks of wood.
Hollow, like caves.
Opaque, like muddy pools.
Who can wait quietly while the mind settles? 
Who can remain still until the moment of action? 
Observers of the *Dao* do not seek fulfillment. 
Not seeking fulfillment, they are not swayed by desire for change.

Empty yourself of everything. 
Let the mind become still. 
The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self 
waits their return.

They grow and flourish and then return to the source. 
Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

The way of nature is unchanging, 
Knowing constancy is insight. 
Not knowing constancy leads to disaster. 
Knowing constancy, the mind is open. 
With an open mind, you will be openhearted. 
Being openhearted, you will act royally. 
Being royal, you will attain the divine. 
Being divine, you will be at one with the *Dao*. 
Being at one with the *Dao* is eternal.
And though the body dies, the *Dao* will never pass away.

becoming empty and still
one can see everything unfolding from emptiness
and returning to emptiness
the movement of cyclic returning is the *dao* of nature

translation differs greatly here
Ivanhoe:
"returning to one’s destiny is known as constancy"

"To embody the Way is to be long lived,
And one will avoid danger to the end of one’s days"
The very highest is barely known. People then come to know and love, then that which is feared, then that which is despised. Who does not trust enough will not be trusted. When actions are performed without unnecessary speech, people say, “We did it!”

When the great Dao is forgotten, kindness and morality arise. When wisdom and intelligence are born, the great pretence begins. When there is no peace within the family, filial piety and devotion arise. When the country is confused and in chaos, loyal ministers appear.

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom, and it will be a hundred times better for everyone. Give up kindness, renounce morality, and men will rediscover filial piety and love. Give up ingenuity, renounce profit, and bandits and thieves will disappear. These three are outward forms alone; they are not sufficient in themselves. It is more important to see the simplicity, to realize one’s true nature, to cast off selfishness, and temper desire.

Give up learning, and put an end to your troubles. Is there a difference between yes and no? Is there a difference between good and evil? Must I fear what others fear? What nonsense! Other people are contented, enjoying the sacrificial feast of the ox. In spring some go to the park, and climb the terrace. But I alone am drifting, not knowing where I am. Like a newborn babe before it learns to smile, I am alone, without a place to go.

Others have more than they need, but I alone have nothing. I am a fool. Oh, yes! I am confused. Others are clear and bright, but I alone am dim and weak. Others are sharp and clever, but I alone am dull and stupid.

“The greatest of rulers is but a shadowy presence” advice to the ruler is to leave well enough alone a kind of political anarchism still acknowledges the need for political structures but the best order is the absence of coercion people say “this is just how we are (ziran) ziran—natural/spontaneous

The great pretence begins, when wisdom (zhi) and intelligence (hui) appears, there is hypocrisy xiao appears only when the state is in chaos

cut off sageliness (sheng), abandon wisdom (zhi)
cut off ren, renounce yi and then the people will return to xiao give up ingenuity/cleverness/book learning (xue) some texts have (li) “ritual” instead of (li) “profit” it is more important to be genuine and simple rather than emphasizing sheng, zhi, ren, yi, and li

a contrast between other people and the Daoist sage while everyone else is bright and merry the sage is still and inactive like a child yet to smile

the multitude have abundance the sage has nothing
Oh, I drift like the waves of the sea,
Without direction, like the restless wind.
Everyone else is busy,
But I alone am aimless and depressed.
I am different.
I am nourished by the great mother.

The greatest Virtue (de) is to follow Dao and Dao alone.
The Dao is elusive and intangible.
Oh, it is intangible and elusive, and yet within is image.
Oh, it is dim and dark, and yet within is essence.
This essence is very real, and therein lies faith.

From the very beginning until now its name has never been forgotten.
Thus I perceive the creation.
How do I know the ways of creation?
Because of this.

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.
Therefore the wise embrace the one
And set an example to all.
Not putting on a display,
They shine forth.
Not justifying themselves,
They are distinguished,
Not boasting,
They receive recognition.
Not bragging,
They never falter.
They do not quarrel,
So no one quarrels with them.
Therefore the ancients say: “Yield and overcome.”
Is that an empty saying?
Be really whole.
And all things will come to you.

To talk little is natural.
High winds do not last all morning.
Heavy rain does not last all day.
Why is that? Heaven and earth!
If heaven and earth cannot make things eternal,
How is it possible for man?
He who follows the Dao
Is at one with the Dao.
He who is virtuous (de)

“Rather than finding their nourishment at the marble temple of learning, the Daoists remain contented at the mother’s breast, suckled on the rich milk of immediate experience and unmediated feeling” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 106).

those of great character (de) follow the dao
but the dao is elusive
as Graham puts it:
“You can get nearer and nearer to discerning it first as an image or model, then as taking shape as a thing, yet it is itself the indefinite out of which the thing defines itself” (Disputers of the Tao, p. 221).
“within is an essence (qing)”

its name has never left it or been forgotten
not because it has an eternal name
“Praise for way-making has never ceased” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 107).

the movement of reversal again

what is meant by the sages embracing the one?
seeing the whole, the oscillations of yin and yang?
Graham: “Lao-tzu frequently calls the undivided the One, although generally in relation to the man or thing which ‘embraces the One’ or ‘grasps the One’. As a name however the One is no more adequate than any other. As soon as you try to conceive the Way you conceive the One, but as soon as you conceive the One you conceive the many” (Disputers of the Tao, p. 222).

a concern with the problem of language pervades the text
Hansen sees the Daodejing as part of an “anti-language” stage of Daoism: “Since language is an instrument of social control, we should avoid it—and everything that goes with it” (A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought, 211).
Ames and Hall find this interpretation to be perhaps going too far throwing the baby out with the bathwater nevertheless

“While we might find a palpable irony in one of the world’s literary classics offering a critique of the language in which it is written, it is undeniably the case that a major theme of the Daodejing is that an
Experiences Virtue (de).
He who loses the way (Dao) is lost.
When you are one with the Dao, The Dao welcomes you.
When you are not at one with Virtue (de).
The Virtue is always there.
When you are at one with loss,
The loss is experienced willingly.
He who does not trust enough.
Will not be trusted.

He who stands on tiptoe is not steady.
He who strides cannot maintain the pace.
He who makes a show is not enlightened.
He who is self-righteous is not respected.
He who boasts achieves nothing.
He who brags will not endure.
According to followers of the Dao, “these are extra food and unnecessary baggage.”
They do not bring happiness.
Therefore followers of the Dao avoid them.

Something mysteriously formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
In the silence and the void,
Standing alone and unchanging,
Eter present and in motion.
Perhaps it is the mother of the ten thousand things.
I do not know its name
Call it Dao.
For lack of a better word, I call it great.
Being great, it flows.
It flows far away.
Having gone far, it returns.

Therefore, “Dao is great;
Heaven (tian) is great;
Earth is great;
The king is also great.”
These are the four great powers of the Universe,
And the king is one of them.

Man follows the earth.
Earth follows heaven.
Heaven follows the Dao.
Dao follows what is natural (ziran).

The heavy is the root of the light;
The still is the master of unrest.
Therefore the sage, traveling all day,
Does not lose sight of his baggage.
Though there are beautiful things to be seen.
He remains unattached and calm.

uncritical use of language can lull us into a distorted understanding of
the nature of the world in which we live” (Daodejing: A Philosophical
Translation, p. 112).

A description of what the sage in tune with the dao is not like
obviously those who try to stand out
the braggarts and blowhards who try so hard to make a show
are “not enlightened”
Ivanhoe: “are not illustrious”
Ames and Hall: “do not shine”

25 is a well-known chapter
Ames and Hall provide a caution about a common reading of this
chapter as a Chinese creation story or cosmogony
“A familiar interpretation of this chapter is that it offers one of the
earliest Chinese cosmogonies, referencing some primal origin behind
the discriminations of our everyday world. This reading becomes
problematic if we think in terms of some initial beginning that is
independent of the process itself. For the Daoist, the flow of experience
has no beginning and no end” (Daodejing: A Philosophical
Translation, p. 116).

once again, the problem with naming the dao
“dao” is not its proper name
but one can call it “dao” or one can call it “great”

the last stanza is significant
Graham:
“An alternative to saying the name ‘Way’ is inadequate is to accept it
but proceed to identify something still farther back, the first of what if
continued would be an infinite series. The same stanza ends by picking
the ‘so of itself’ (tzu jan), pure spontaneity” (Disputers of
the Tao, p. 226).

again the oscillation of yin and yang
the reconcililation of polarities
“This chapter might well be read together with chapters 7 and 13. If
rulers treat all things with equal seriousness and respect, their own
persons will be taken care of as a matter of course. The way to be rid of
such personal concerns is to be rid of the distinction between one’s
Why should the lord of ten thousand chariots act lightly in public?
To be light is to lose one's root.
To be restless is to lose one's control.

This is called “following the light”
Ivanhoe: “inherting enlightenment”
Ames and Hall: “following their natural acuity”
what they mean by “acuity” here is the insight that enable one to make the best of whatever situation arises

“In the Daoist worldview, ‘evil’ is the opposite of efficacy. It is a failure of imagination, the inability to make the most of things, a missed opportunity. It is the failure to recognize and appreciate the worth of both people and things, and as a consequence, to misuse them. There is no need to pick and choose, or to squander anything. For those who are truly proficient at what they do, there is no wastage—nothing left over, no loose ends” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 120.)

The continuity between polarities, a persistent theme in the Daodejing, is here applied specifically to gender, suggesting that the Daoist image of the most consummate and fertile person is an androgyne who has access to the full range of gender traits” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 121).

Ames and Hall see the river valley image connected to the fertility of the female expressing the “inexhaustible cosmic fecundity” of the universe

again the image of the uncarved block of wood
the natural state of the “so of itself” (ziran)
this imagery has had a profound effect upon East Asian aesthetics
consider the Japanese aesthetic of wabi sabi

“When the patterns of nature are taken as counsel for political order in
The universe is sacred.
You cannot improve it.
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.
If you try to hold it, you will lose it.
So sometimes things are ahead and sometimes they are behind;
Sometimes breathing is hard, sometimes it comes easily;
Sometimes there is strength and sometimes weakness;
Sometimes one is up and sometimes down.
Therefore the sage avoids extremes, excesses, and complacency.

30
Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of Dao,
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.

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 Dao.
That which goes against the Dao comes to an early end.

31
Good weapons are instruments of fear; all creatures hate them.
Therefore followers of Dao never use them.
The wise man prefers the left.
The man of war prefers the right.

Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man’s tools.
He uses them only when he has no choice.
Peace and quiet are dearest to his heart.
And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing.
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself.

On happy occasions precedence is given to the left,
On sad occasions to the right.
In the army the general stands on the left,
The commander-in-chief on the right.
This means that war is conducted like a funeral.

this chapter turns to the devastation of war

does the Daodejing counsel pacifism?

seems to indicate here that weapons of war might be a necessary evil

but in general wars are not to be celebrated
cautions about the danger of victory
celebrating victory might lead to a penchant for war

what would Laozi recommend concerning the problem of terrorism?
When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.

The Dao is forever undefined.
Small though it is in the unformed state, it cannot be grasped.
If kings and lords could harness it,
The ten thousand things would naturally obey.
Heaven and earth would come together
And gentle rain fall.
Men would need no more instruction and all things would take their course.

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.
Dao in the world is like a river flowing home to the sea.

Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.
Mastering others requires force;
Mastering the self needs strength.
He who knows he has enough is rich.
Perseverance is a sign of willpower.
He who stays where he is endures.
To die but not to perish is to be eternally present.

The great Dao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right.
The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back.
It fulfills its purpose silently and makes no claim.
It nourishes the ten thousand things,
And yet it is not their lord.
It has no aim; it is very small.
The ten thousand things return to it,
Yet it is not their lord.
It is very great.
It does not show greatness,
And is therefore truly great.

All men will come to him who keeps to the one,
For there he rests and happiness and peace.
Passersby may stop for music and good food,
But a description of the Dao

opening line here is: dao is wuming

Ivanhoe’s translation picks up that the “unformed state” is again the image of the unhewn wood thus connecting dao, once again, to ziran

the problem with naming again too many names

the last line invites discussion
the same imagery is used in the Upanishads
the river flowing home to the sea represents there the absorption of the self into the Self, the delusion of a separate self into the Atman which is identical to Brahman, the undefinable absolute One behind the illusory veil of the many

Ames and Hall caution that what is going on here in the Daodejing is not a One behind the many, but rather “the inseparability of the one and the many” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 128).

as Ivanhoe points out in the footnotes to this chapter this theme of contentment, or knowing when one has enough, runs through the text

if the sages model themselves on the dao then . . .

“The effective ‘governing’ of the sage is analogous to the flourishing of an ecological habitat. The community is self-defining, with its ethos emerging out of the collaboration of its constituents. Sages are simply virtuoso coordinators, getting the most out of their populations without the imposition of any personal agenda. Their ‘sagacity’ at its most excellent is not only uncelebrated, but even goes unannounced” (Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation, p. 131).

again the problem of language to put the dao into words is to limit it to leave it with no flavor
It seems without substance or flavor.
It cannot be seen, it cannot be heard,
And yet it cannot be exhausted.

36
That which shrinks
Must first expand.
That which fails
Must first be strong.
That which is cast down
Must first be raised.
Before receiving
There must be giving.
This is called perception of the nature of things.
Soft and weak overcome hard and strong.
Fish cannot leave deep waters.
And a country's weapons should not be displayed.

37
Dao abides in non-action (wuwei),
Yet nothing is left undone.
If kings and lords observed this,
The ten thousand things would develop naturally.
If they still desired to act,
They would return to the simplicity of formless substance.
Without form there is no desire.
Without desire there is tranquility.
And in this way all things would be at peace.


(Text has been altered to replace Wade-Giles with Pinyin.)

**Questions**

1. Why does the *Daodejing* begin with the problem of naming the *dao*? What does the *Daodejing* then go on to say about the *dao*? How does this *dao* contrast with the Confucian *dao*?