

BLUE PAPERS

Dàodé jīng 道德經

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The *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tàoté chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) is a highly influential classical Daoist work. It was originally called the *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzu*; Book of Venerable Masters). Although attributed to the legendary *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzu*; “Master Lao/Old Master”), the text actually is a multi-vocal anthology containing historical and textual material from the fourth to second century BCE. It includes the teachings and practices of various anonymous elders associated with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism.



With respect to the titles, *zǐ* 子 should be taken as plural (“masters”) rather than singular (“master”), as is the case for the slightly later *Huáinánzi* 淮南子 (Book of the Huainan Masters). The honorific title, perhaps bestowed as early as around 145 BCE, became increasingly used from the late Eastern Han dynasty (ca. 180 CE) onward. *Dào* 道 (Tao/Way) refers to the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. *Dé* (*té*), here translated as “inner power,” but also rendered as “integrity,” “potency,” and “virtue,”

refers to the way in which the Dao manifests as embodied human activity in the world, activity that exerts a beneficial and transformative influence. *Jīng* 經 (“scripture/classic”) indicates a specific genre of Daoist literature, which is generally anonymous and considered revealed, inspired, and authoritative. As such, the *Dàodé jīng* is one of the most important and influential scriptures in Daoist history. It has thus been referred to more poetically as *The Way of Life*.

Like the larger corpus of classical Daoism, the *Dàodé jīng* is not “philosophy” (disembodied thought/ideas) unless one understands the “love of wisdom” along the lines of Pierre Hadot’s revisionist emphasis on spiritual exercises. The text includes a vast repertoire of foundational Daoist views, principles, practices, models, and qualities. While its teachings are often reduced to *wúwéi* 無為 (“non-action”) and *zìrán* 自然 (“suchness”), these are informed by and express a **Daoist contemplative approach** and perspective, specifically one rooted in **apophatic and quietistic meditation**. There are many references to *bào* 抱 (“embracing”), *fù* 復/*guī* 歸 (“returning”), and *shǒu* 守 (“guarding”). Emphasis is also placed on attaining various “beyond” or “non-states” (*wú* 無), including desirelessness (*wúyù* 無欲), namelessness (*wúmíng* 無名), non-knowing (*wúzhī* 無知), and the like.

The *Dàodé jīng* exerted major influence on the **larger Daoist tradition**. Connection and continuity. Some examples include the Nine Practices (*jiǔxíng* 九行) of the *Tiānshī* 天師 (Celestial Masters) movement, the Daoist hermeneutical movements of *Xuánxué* 玄學 (Profound Learning) and *Chóngxuán* 重玄 (Twofold Mystery), *Gé Hóng*’s 葛洪 (283-343) Daoist name of *Bàopǔ* 抱朴 (Embracing Simplicity), and the name of *Xuánmén* 玄門 (Mysterious Gate) for “Daoism” itself.