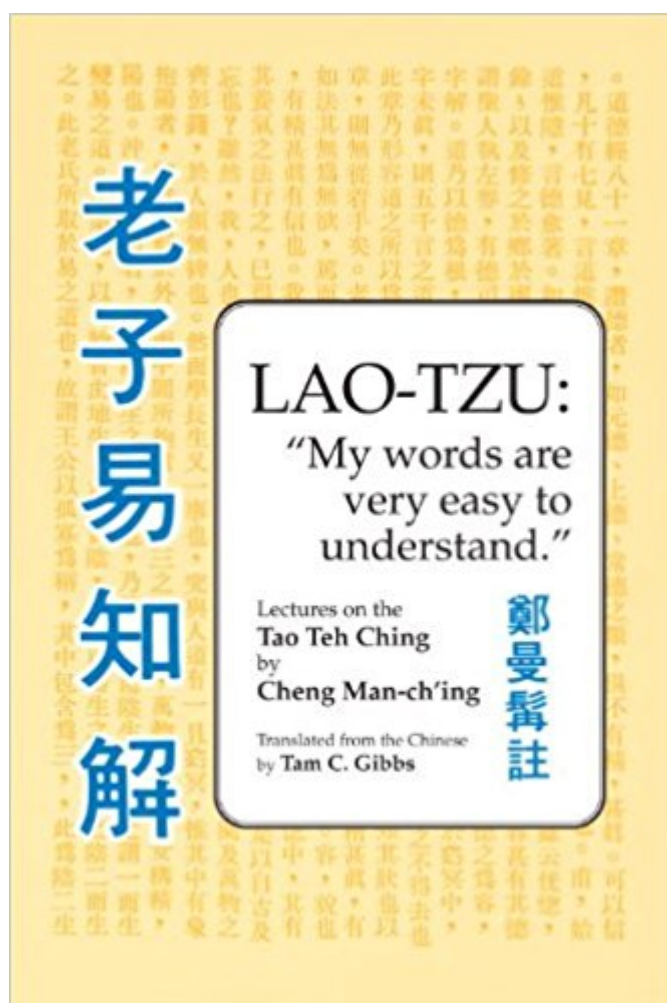


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# Lao Tzu: My Words Are Very Easy To Understand: Lectures On The Tao Teh Ching



## Synopsis

Lao-tzu: My Words Are Very Easy to Understand interprets the sayings of Lao-tzu, one of the earliest writers in Chinese history. His work describes the merest traces and marvels of the Tao, and promotes Non-action, concepts that are central to these unique teachings of thousands of years ago.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Text: Chinese, English

Man-ch'ing Cheng was born in Chekiang Province in 1901. He studied with many renowned masters of Ta'chi, and at age 30, retired from teaching and traveled with master of classics Ch'ien Ming-shan until he finally 'entered the Tao of knowledge.' Cheng established the Shr Jung School of T'ai-chi Chu'uan and Taipei, and has lectured in Taiwan and America.

There is true heart here. The discussion opens me to Principle in this book. The author sourced the T'ai Chi short form (yang style) in order to make it available to Westerners. I studied it with The School of Tai Chi Chuan (NYC, London,, Amsterdam, other cities). I started in Amherst, later Chicago, Gainesville, Neimegen, Los Angeles. They (we) focused on Principle too.

Good insights. However, Cheng Man-Ch'ing was a better Tai Chi master than a philosopher. As a

Tai Chi teacher, the value to me was in reading the comments by Cheng Man-Ch'ing notwithstanding the accuracy of his interpretations.

as I want it Every thing as I wanted it. Fast and perfect (I hate to be forced to say more! If something is perfect I should be able to rate this and this should be enough. I am not going to take part in rating in furur because of this silly duty. This should have been enough.)

To begin with the positive, this text is faithful to the Chinese original. To end with the negative, while it is faithful to the original, the translation is literal to the point that in many places it makes little to no sense. The reader will get very little feel for what the Tao Te Ching truly is.

I have the original 1981 edition of this book, and have treasured it for the last 28 years, carrying it with me everywhere I go, reading it and re-reading it often, and filling the free spaces on its pages with my handwritten notes and comments. The book itself is a translation by Tam Gibbs, of both the Lao Tzu text and of a commentary on each chapter, in Chinese, given by legendary Tai Chi teacher Cheng Man-ching during a series of public lectures. For the most part, Cheng Man-ching's observations on the text can largely be disregarded, because they do not do much to expand upon the meaning of the Lao Tzu text, in fact, in several sections I believe he not only muddles the meaning of some concepts, but gets it wrong on some counts. I do not make this comment lightly, as Cheng Man-ching was a great proponent of Yang style Tai Chi, perhaps one of the 20th century's greatest, and this reviewer is actually a 4th generation Tai Chi student of Cheng's lineage, not to mention the fact that Tam Gibbs himself was Cheng's main American student. Given Cheng's knowledge and ability in Tai Chi, a deep understanding of Taoism is unequivocally present, but alas I feel it did not extend to a useful dialogue on the Tao Te Ching. Often Cheng appears deliberately cryptic and obtuse in some of his explanations, even when it is clear that explaining is what he is intending to do. The real gem of this book is the translation by Gibbs, of the Lao Tzu text itself. Gibbs, now sadly deceased, (as is Cheng) was fluent in Chinese, acted as Cheng's interpreter, and was a loyal student of the master. I am not certain what formal academic qualifications Tam Gibbs held, but due to his lengthy relationship with Cheng Man-ching and his study of Tai Chi, I would not hesitate to say he was well qualified to translate Lao Tzu. The Tam Gibbs translation is my favourite English rendering of the text, and in my opinion is by far the best of many, many English translations. I know this may be an unpopular and narrow-minded attitude to take on this subject, as translation is a very subjective thing due to the interpretive process necessarily undertaken by the

translator, but I have in my collection at least 30 English translations by both mainstream academics and individual commentators, as well as several hundred academic papers from publications such as the Journal of Asian Studies (University of Minnesota), Journal of Chinese Philosophy (University of Hawaii), Philosophy East and West (University of Hawaii), The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (London University), Chinese Studies in Philosophy (International Arts and Sciences Press), T'oung Pao - International Journal of Chinese Studies, Journal of the American Oriental Society (University of Washington), Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies (University of California), Comparative Literature Studies (Penn State university), Asian Philosophy, Contemporary Review, and the International Review of Mission. Indeed, I also undertook an undergraduate degree program in Chinese language and linguistics in order to deepen my understanding of the original Chinese text, and it is my humble opinion that Tam Gibbs provides us with the best representation of Lao Tzu's thought in English. Why? This is not easy to answer. It is my belief that the English translations available to us today can be distilled into two main types; those by academics or "observers", and those by practitioners, or "participants". Yes, this is defining things in terms of an Emic versus Etic approach ([...]), and many could convincingly argue one way or the other in support of either. Personally, I take the middle ground, and believe it is best to first maintain the logic and rationale of academic rigor while studying the philosophy as a participant. It is a characteristic of Taoism that understanding comes largely through experience and personal discovery, rather than by strictly following a line of logical, rational thinking from a purely academic perspective. Taoist writings, and the Lao Tzu text is certainly no exception, are characterised by veiled and poetic language that deliberately hides or encodes meaning in the text with the use of literary devices such as textual paradox, allegory, metaphor, and reference, etc., which require the reader to think, explore, and discover the intended meaning themselves. This of course makes the reader feel as though they have gained something of value, because meaning was discovered through their own efforts. This is complicated by the fact that classical Chinese writing is not only very dense with meaning, but it is also quite ambiguous. Chinese written characters have often dual or more meanings, furthermore, objects and concepts can be represented by more than one single, definitive character, so the choice of characters within a phrase can create great depth of meaning through this ambiguity. Tam Gibbs has managed to reproduce this aspect of Taoist writing in his rendering of the text to English, and in doing so has relayed the tone of the original text, as well as maintained a depth of meaning beyond the simple and shallow. The result is a rendering that is at first glance archaic and obscure, often complex, but upon further readings is found to be insightful and pithy. Gibbs' version has sometimes been labelled by critics as convoluted and difficult to

understand, but I think this attitude is more a product of today's fickle and materialistic society than a mistake on Gibbs' part. You see, many of the popular translations in recent years have been touted as 'easier to understand', written in 'simple and clear text', and 'presented in a style that is more relevant to the modern age', but what these versions tend to do is cater to an aesthetic and in the process become inherently bland. The text of Lao Tzu itself says, in Chapter 81, "Words of truth are not beautiful, beautiful words are not truthful." Gibbs' translation does not sacrifice depth and complexity of meaning for a beautiful appearance. He does not try to make a complex passage simpler to understand by reducing it to simpler language - if a passage in the original Chinese is complex, so is the passage in English. Gibbs does not blindly follow in the footsteps of earlier popular translators and commentators on the Tao Te Ching, or 'tow the party line' when choosing words and phrases to represent the Chinese text. He appears to start afresh, and use words and phrases of his own peculiar determination, based of course on his own experiences through studying Tao and Tai Chi under Cheng. A good example of this at the textual level, is his rendering of several characters in Chapter 19. The text of line 1 reads: jue sheng chi zi. Gibbs translates this as "Divorce wisdom and abandon intelligence", yet the other twenty nine translators in my collection render it as "Discard the sage and throw away sageliness", or any number of variations, all of which imply getting rid of both, and most of which also imply getting rid of the "sage" as a person, and his "sageliness". Now, why does Gibbs not follow suit with the others, but use quite obviously a different choice of words, which convey a completely different meaning? Let's look at the first character jue, rendered by Gibbs as divorce, and others as discard. According to Leon Wieger in his classic work on the etymology of Chinese Characters, jue is composed of elements which suggest the 'cutting of a thread into pieces' - to separate. Now in common usage, jue is used to represent 'discard' (cut off), but it also means 'to separate'. If the Lao Tzu text meant to discard both sheng (wisdom/the sage), and zi (intelligence/sageliness), why does it not use either the same character for both actions, or say to discard both? Why use two different characters to describe the same action? It is clear to me that jue in this case is not meant to mean 'discard', but 'to separate'. Why would this verse tell us to 'Discard the sage', when elsewhere throughout the text, it is describing the virtues of being a sage, and suggesting we become like a sage. In every other instance where the Sage is mentioned, and that is twenty six chapters out of the eighty one that make up the Tao Te Ching, it is depicted as an ideal state of being that we should strive to achieve. So why would other translators and commentators say that only in chapter 19 the Sage is something we need to discard? The answer is simple...they don't understand the subtleties of Taoism because they don't participate in it. There is a subtle difference between wisdom and intelligence. The text is saying we want to

separate wisdom from intelligence, abandon intelligence and retain wisdom. The same applies to the four other instances of jue appearing in the text, in lines 3 and 5, and Chapter 20 line 1. In each case the text is drawing a distinction between two closely related concepts, getting us to abandon one, and retain the other of the pair. The differences between the two in each pair is quite subtle, but they are there. Another thing I like about this book is that the translator simply provides the translation, and does not add his own commentary or introduction, nor tries to put the work in any context which would attempt to make the content more palatable for the reader. Instead, he lets the translation speak for itself. Overall, a text such as the Tao Te Ching is not meant to be immediately understandable by the reader. Its message is deep and far reaching, so it follows that a number of repeated readings over a lengthy period of time is required before full understanding comes. Tam Gibbs makes the English rendering interesting enough and individualistic enough to be taken notice of and its phrases remembered over the long term, which means the work is valuable enough to be kept close for a long time.

As stated in the title "My words are very easy to understand", this translation of the classic Tao Teh Ching truly makes Lao Tzu's words (wisdom) very easy to understand. Congratulations to the author and translator!

Professor Cheng was a master of five excellences meaning the five traditional Chinese arts. He was one of the last of a group of people who were taught the traditional teachings of Chinese culture. This translation is not written by an outsider but an insider, who lived and breathed the philosophy contain within this book. He authoritatively corrects even other past Chinese translations of this work. Its availability is a treasure that should not be overlooked. This book gives one an opportunity to begin understanding the depths of Chinese philosophy.

This book shows surprisingly that one can master the power of T'ai chi ch'uan without fully understanding the Taoist classic. His translation as any translation only corresponds to his views on the classic, and he makes it obvious that he is not aware of Taoist oral traditions. But it is still an interesting translation that correct quite a few common errors of translations by people whose mother language is not chinese.

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