peter merel

# the agile way
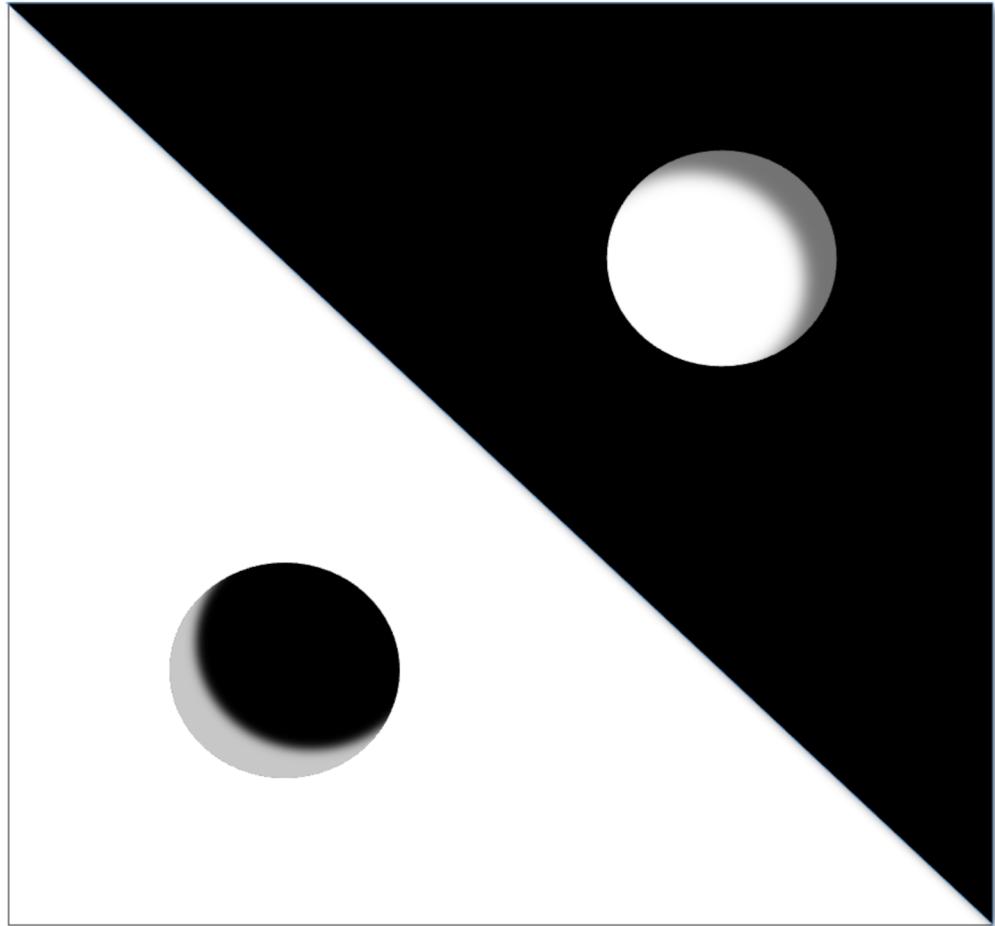
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# the agile way

## connect adapt simplify

## Peter Merel

This book is available at https://leanpub.com/agiletao

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*For Gigi, Riley, and Larry.*

# Contents

the agile way

**Cover:**

*A hole in a hill? A yin-yang straightened? Tide pools? Go Stones? An eclipse?*
*What do you see and why do you see it?*

# Open Sample

This sample includes three of the six parts of *the agile way*, The rest of the book is available for purchase at http://leanpub.com/agiletao – and soon on Amazon too.

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# Foreword

*by Kent Beck*

This is a dangerous little book.

I first met Pete when I was writing about a software development method I called Extreme Programming. The name was a problem – project managers of the day wouldn't buy it. But when we began calling it Agile, it sold like hotcakes.

Trouble is, anyone can call anything Agile. The label was what people wanted. Which is why, in recent years, Beth and I have been writing instead about the Forest and the Desert.

Forest cultures have plentiful resources but hidden dangers. You have time to help your colleagues, and they to help you, but, if you stray off the path, thorns and worse await. From the Desert, it's hard to believe in a Forest. It sounds like a made up story. But from the Forest the assumptions of the Desert seem equally absurd.

Both Forest and Desert do valuable work, both are self-reinforcing, but the Forest builds creative community across an organization in a way that seems like ludicrous luxury in a Desert. So … what makes the difference between the two and how can you change the one into the other?

That's what this book is about. Here's my biggest lesson from reading it – to embrace change is the human condition. Anything less is bureaucracy. Bureaucracy may seem everywhere on the rise, even inescapable as wealth and power tighten their grip. But that's an illusion because wealth and power can only control systems, and all systems are subject to change.

This book is a how-to guide for changing a bureaucratic system into a creative community. Doing so is extreme in the sense I originally

meant. The most extreme programming develops the software of human civilization. That's what makes this book dangerous. And so beautiful to read, it made me cry.

**Kent Beck,**
**February 2025**

# Introduction

The oldest, deepest, and shortest book on agility in existence, **the agile way** is a guide to creative community for individuals and organizations experiencing times of extreme change. Written before the invention of paper, its interlocking patterns apply as well to the information and intelligence revolutions as the agricultural one in which it began.

How should you approach this little book? Later editions may detail modern implications, but this first one encourages readers to tease these out for themselves. In the manner of a *koan*, each pattern supports two readings. First, as a practical solution to a commonplace problem in one of the book's six contexts. And then each pattern carries a deeper meaning through which, on reflection, the reader may not come away unchanged.

To avoid throwing you in at the deep end, here's a frame for the list of agile qualities you'll find in chapter 1:

- *Listening as if crossing thin ice* – because change, uncertainty, and ambiguity are everywhere.
- *Testing like a boat on dark water* – so that carelessness, haste and imbalance won't sink you.
- *Adapting like a stranger to a far shore* – to give and take what the market takes and gives.
- *Simplifying like a melting snowflake* – as systems grow as rigid and inefficient as one.
- *Connecting like the deep woods* – to sustain continuous growth across cycles of change.
- *Leading as a valley does the river* – to quicken and join channels of mutual benefit.

- *Sharing as its silt feeds the fields* – to open bottlenecks and foster innovation.

There are further explanations at the back of the book concerning its journey at the hands of the current author and its line by line correspondence with the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu.

# Change

This section hinges on the phrase *sheng ren*, traditionally translated as "the sage". *Sheng* means perceptive, competent and responsive, and *ren* is just people or person, so here it's agile person, agile people, or just "agility".

# 1. The River (xv)

Agility is practical, not mystical.
A way of life, not a state of grace.

Listening like a man on thin ice,
Testing like a boat in strange waters,
Adapting like a traveller to a distant land,
Connecting like the deep woods,
Simplifying like a melting snowflake,
Leading as a valley does the river,
Sharing as its silt feeds the fields.

Imagine the ice solid or the water clear,
Stop to plan your way ahead,
Ignore what moves underfoot;
You fall and disappear.

## 2. Embracing Change (xxiii)

Great changes happen fast.
A storm may last a night,
Or a flood a day,
And change your world forever.

As nature's forms change, so must our own.
Embracing change, we lead it
Like a ship sailing on the tide.
Anchored to forms, or set adrift,
The tide overwhelms us.

# 3. Throughput (lxxviii)

Though nothing is so soft and flexible,
Water carves mountains and drowns cities
Which cannot control it.

Glaciers and floods –
People see in these the force of water
And fail to grasp its real power.

The agile channel water to irrigate fields
To multiply grain so people won't go hungry
And fight over it.

## 4. Running Water (v/viii/vii)

Like a watercourse, agility aligns people,
Dissolving their differences,
Clarifying their understanding,
Quickening growth,
Opening bottlenecks,
Filling opportunity,
And speeding flow.

As water runs where it's not blocked,
The agile carve channels of mutual benefit,
Learning by sharing learning,
Letting go old ways to find better ones,
And trusting in those trusting in them.
As a rising tide floats all boats
Agility supplies community.

# 5. Sharing Learning (xlviii/xli)

As babies when they laugh,
And students when they question,
The agile learn together.

Learning makes work easier
By increasing the work not done
To adapt people to each other.

Laughter comes by surprise
As learning makes discoveries
That reduce the work remaining.
The less you share learning,
The more work remains to do.

# 6. The Agile Ways (lxvii)

People often talk about agility;
Often, talk is all there is to it;
But there are three ways
Agile people work and live differently:
Connection, adaptation, and simplicity.

Connection generates strength,
Adaptation, flexibility,
And simplicity, ease.

Strength without an open hand,
Flexibility without a coiled spine,
Ease without a quiet heart,
Spell the end of agility.

# 7. Open Hand (xlix)

Agility connects people like a family
By fostering them.

The agile are fair to the fair,
And to the unfair,
Fostering fairness.

They're trustworthy to the trustworthy,
And the untrustworthy,
Fostering trust.

They're kind to those within their community,
And without,
Fostering kindness.

No matter what someone says or seems,
They treat each like each other.

# 8. Coiled Spine (xlv)

As nature adapts without end or intent,
Effort or limit,
Reason or regret,
Agile people adapt their forms
To the flow of forms.

Bending to straighten,
Emptying to fill,
Failing to learn,
Risking to gain,
Leaving to return.

XXX the form of this chapter has grown out of hand and needs to be restored to meet the originals.

# 9. Quiet Heart (xxiv/xxii)

Vanity loses respect;
Deceit loses trust;
Debt loses choice;
Bias loses integrity;
Habit loses opportunity.

Agility doesn't respond in kind,
But sees these problems as damage,
And routes around them.

Losing sight of yourself, you see clearly.
Letting go your beliefs, you grasp X.
Forgetting your ambitions, you find purpose.

Without indulgence leaves nothing to deride;
Without conspiracy leaves nothing to expose;
Without usury leaves nothing to enslave;
Without prejudice leaves nothing to discredit;
Without reaction leaves nothing to manipulate.

## 10. Human Nature (xxix/xxii)

You can't control human nature no matter what you do;
People always find new ways to express it.
Stamp out one sin and another breeds;
Punish one rebel and others conspire;
Some lead where others follow;
Some own what others owe;
Some win what others lose;
Some make rules others obey.

Agility only makes rules to control motives
To compete, hoard, and exploit.
Even these rules are only effective
When they apply impartially
For mutual benefit:
Agile work achieves nothing
But to make all work easier;
Agile business profits no one
More than it profits everyone.

# 11. Growing The Pie (xxxiii)

Where bureaucrats form hierarchies
The agile form communities.
Where philosophers increase knowledge
The agile increase understanding.
Where princes control empires
The agile control desires.
Where heroes defend their homeland
The agile survive their homeland.

The agile care less for growing their slice than growing the pie,
Investing in others and partaking with them.
As nature flourishes where it doesn't struggle
The agile prosper by not competing.

# Connection

Agile organizations don't come from a manifesto, framework, or guru. They evolve through *xiang*: aligning networks of mutual benefit.

## 12. Mutual Benefit (lxi/xxxv)

As flowers attract bees,
Business connects traders
To their mutual benefit.

Opening markets to smaller players
The large benefit from their supply.
Opening markets to larger players
The small benefit from their support.

As plants feed and shelter animals,
Animals fertilize and propagate plants.
So, in alignment, each benefits
By connecting the others.

## 13. The Bow (lxxvii)

Alignment is like drawing a bow.
As the gap decreases, the range increases.
As the top descends, the bottom rises.
As each gets more than they give,
It's a positive sum game.

Where leaders reward competition,
Making the many work to benefit the few,
That's like aiming your bow at the sun.

## 14. Shared Outcomes (lxv/lxiv)

Agile leaders don't preach mutual benefit
Nor call it a virtue
And themselves its masters.
They just share the benefits of shared outcomes
And stop rewarding competing ones.

Like a spring into an aquifer,
Mutual benefit fills a community
With ease and trust.

Agile leaders share the benefits of shared outcomes
Without preaching mutual benefit
Because preaching makes it political
And politics weakens community
Where ease and trust strengthen it.

# 15. Community (lix)

Agility aligns people gently
As if cooking a delicate fish,
Using tact to keep trust intact.

Tact eases agreement,
And easy agreement carves channels of trust.
Where these channels join together,
Competition is displaced
And community grows in its place.

As people collaborate over time,
Their trust in their community strengthens.
Connecting to each others' benefit
Weaves their pasts and futures together.

# 16. Losing Alignment (xxxviii/liv a) XXX

Lose alignment and community remains;
Divide community and trust remains;
Break trust and justice remains;
Corrupt justice and fear remains.

Communities don't divide themselves
Nor fall into compromise and conflict
Without losing alignment first.

Where mutual benefit serves trust,
Justice compromises it serve it,
And power compromises it to serve itself.

## 17. Supplant Fear (xxxviii/liv b)

Power is as difficult to uproot
As fear to dispel
As each generation
Seeds it in the next.

The weed of fear binds justice and community
Into a matrix of struggle
With faith in the flower of greatness
At its root.

Greatness roots in trust, not fear,
Yielding flow, not flowers.
So cultivate the one
To supplant the other.

# 18. Culture and Nature (liv)

Trust is a child
Nourished by a family
Prospered by a community
Organized by a culture
Sustained by an ecosystem.

As trust aligns benefits,
Family aligns intents,
Community aligns agreements,
Culture aligns learnings,
And ecosystem aligns them to nature.

So, to cultivate trust,
Align culture to nature.

# 19. Command and Control (xviii/xix)

Where competition is rewarded,
Mutual benefit is broken;
As people work against each others benefit
Owners and managers gain control.

So, where alignment is lost
Parties and politicians take command,
Courts and lawyers,
Priests and princes.

Where we control command and control,
People share and collaborate;
Outlaw laws and taxes,
Trade and markets multiply;
Eliminate roles and responsibilities,
Conspiracy and corruption disappear.

Yet such ideals treat symptoms
Where real remedies treat causes.
Measure throughput and open bottlenecks;
Simplify workflows and minimize wastes;
Share the benefits of shared outcomes.

## 20. Priests and Princes (xxxix/xxxii)

Priests speak of a heaven
Where the sky is always blue,
The ground always sure,
The valleys green,
The rivers full,
The soil fertile,
The people wealthy,
And the king eternal.

Yet the sky must darken
For, without rain,
The ground cracks,
The valleys brown,
The rivers stop,
The soil blows,
The people starve,
And overthrow the king.

Princes depend on peasants
As priests on followers,
Each claiming to be wiser,
Greater, closer to heaven,
To keep people in their power.

## 21. Power To The People (xxxix/xxxii)

Were priests and princes ordained by heaven,
All nature would obey them;
Sweet rains would fall
To quench their every thirst.

As nature has no true form,
No one can truly control it;
Princes only control systems of forms
All subject to change.

So agile leaders use their power
To empower people to collaborate and trade
Like streams flowing into a river,
And rivers into the sea.

## 22. Cultivating Alignment (xxviii)

Accept power without exploiting it
To open channels of mutual benefit
To plant the seeds of trust.

Learn secrets without making them
To weave communities of mutual benefit
And nourish the roots of trust.

Master politics without playing it
To cultivate a culture of mutual benefit
And share the harvest of trust.

# Leadership

Agile leadership (*zhu*) empowers community by working on the rules its games – its reward models, accounting paradigms, technologies and learning flows.

## 23. Stone Keel (xxvi)

The captain of a great ship
Tirelessly guides it at sea;
Until, safe in port,
He can lose it in sleep.
So, calm is the master of haste,
And care the path to ease.

The captain of a great ship
Cannot treat it like a pleasure boat,
Steering hastily or carelessly.
Without care he loses his bearings at sea;
Without calm he loses the trust of his crew.
A great captain doesn't point his ship like a painted figurehead
But balances her like a stone keel.

## 24. Leadership as a Culture (lxvi/lxxii)

By running beneath them,
A valley aligns a myriad streams into a river.

In this way the agile:
Prioritize without issuing commands,
Regulate without imposing controls,
Gain loyalty without requiring obedience,
Recognition without pomp and ceremony,
And cooperation without inspiring fear.

Given freedom to collaborate and trade,
People naturally supply each other leadership.
With no reason to fear leaders,
They trust and support them.

Without fear of leadership,
People work for the benefit of each others' children,
Serve those who serve them,
And supply leadership
By generating leaders.

## 25. Greatness (xxvii)

As great explorers leave no trail unmapped;
Great speakers, no question unanswered;
Great teachers, no fact unexplained;
Great generals, no threat unchecked;
Great weavers, no thread unravelled,
So great leaders adapt all people to mutual benefit,
Even the weakest.

To multiply their strength
The strong must adapt the weak
As the weak are the source of their strength.
Where the strong neglect the weak
Chaos results no matter how clever you are.

This is the method of adaptation:
As wood is shaped, it becomes a tool;
As a person is served, they become a servant;
And great carpenters leave no wood uncarved.

## 26. Fire In Darkness (xl/xli)

As trees are adaptations of seeds,
And seeds of dirt,
Nature adapts by reproducing.
People do so by learning.

As we learn to adapt,
Wealth is born in poverty;
Rebellion in bondage;
Family in loneliness;
Liberty in terror;
Innovation in scarcity;
Strategy in retreat;
Fire in darkness.

## 27. Leadership Adapts (xxxvii/xvii)

As nature adapts its creatures to each other,
Agile leaders align communities by
Neglecting no one,
Controlling no one,
And taking no one's side.

The best leaders are barely mentioned by their followers;
The next best, famed and praised;
The next feared;
And the next despised.
Breaking trust with people,
People lose trust in them.

People prosper under agile leadership by adapting to each other
So that, as the leader achieves their goals,
Their followers see the outcomes as their own.

## 28. Humility (lxx)

The more you stand apart from people,
The less you understand what they feel
Where the more you live as one of them,
The more willingly they adapt to your words.

As a leader's words and actions serve community,
Promoting neither art nor strategy,
Community supports them.
This is the benefit of humility.
The agile wear plain clothes;
And choose their words with care.

## 29. Keeping Trust (lxxxi/lvi)

Words are often untrue
And truth seldom spoken;
Words are often confusing
And truth seldom believed;
Words are often broken;
And truth seldom trusted.

The agile don't offer words
When words won't serve alignment.
They reserve opinions and judgements
To ease differences and disagreements,
And check their power
To empower people to trust each other.

Above friendship and enmity,
Wealth and ambition,
Honor and disgrace,
They keep the trust within honor.

## 30. Fortress and Palace (lxviii/liii)

Trust makes the finest weapon and strongest defense.
As, building community, you weave trust between people,
So, securing peace, it surrounds you like a fortress.

On this basis community progresses
As if following a main road
And never risks losing its way.

Although following a main road is easy,
Many follow the scenic route.
As palaces rise,
Fields turn to weeds
And granaries empty.
Wearing fine clothes,
Bearing sharp swords,
Hoarding wealth and power,
Keeping courtiers and courtesans,
Are detours leading away from trust.

## 31. Too Much (ix/xii)

If you temper a sword to the sharpest, it shatters;
Fill a cup to the brim, it spills;
Hoard food, it spoils;
Concentrate power, it corrupts.

As too much light blinds,
Too much sound deafens,
Too much flavor disgusts,
Too much talk confuses,
Too much wealth impoverishes.

The agile say enough when they have enough
And grow their slice by growing the pie.

## 32. Autonomy In Alignment (lvii)

Agile leaders align communities
By establishing no laws but to secure trust,
No taxes but to encourage trade,
And no rewards but mutual benefit.

Where leaders bring people into alignment,
They collaborate and commune;
Where leaders command and control,
People collude and compete.

The more values and principles, the more sinners there are;
The more fines and taxes, the more cheats;
The more hierarchies and frameworks, the more bureaucrats;
The more police and soldiers, the more conspiracies.
The more hungry children, the more rebels.

As you punish rebellion, people revolt,
Trading their lives for better ones.

XXX moved first para to previous chapter; might want to fix the roman numerals

## 33. Without An Axe (lxxv/lxviii/lxxiv)

Your police may suppress and jailers torture
And armies displace and masters enslave,
But, once people have nothing left to lose,
They lose their fear.

When those whose lives don't count
Outnumber those who count only their own,
And they have no fear left,
Force can no longer control them.

Trying to control people with nothing left to lose
Is like chopping wood without an axe;
You only hurt your hands.

# Explanations

# Before Agile

*Listening, testing, coding and refactoring. That's all there is to software. Anyone who says different is selling something.* − **Kent Beck, Extreme Programming Explained, 1st Ed., 2000**

*Listening as if crossing thin ice, testing as a boat on dark water, adapting as a stranger to a far shore, simplifying as a melting snowflake ...* − **Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, 3,000 years earlier.**

XP Explained was the first book about agile software development, but not the first agile book. Three years before publishing XP Explained, Beck shared drafts of it on Ward's Wiki, a hive of software radicals sharing development patterns in the mid 1990s. I was one, contributing content with quotes from my 1993 "GNL" translation of Lao Tzu. Agile manifesto author Alistair Cockburn liked that translation so well that he hosted it on his website back then. And I spoke on "The Tao of Extreme Programming" at the first agile conference, *XP2K*, nine months before Extreme folded into Agile at Snowbird.

I thought then that the relationship between agilism and taoism was history repeating – with Agile's refutation of bureaucratic management mirroring Lao Tzu's refutation of Confucian orthodoxy. I wrote about it that way in the third XP book. It was another decade before I realized Lao Tzu was literally writing about agility, and the relationship of the one with the other is an identity. Because, to get that, I had to kill the Dude.

## Killing the Dude

Silk tears, string rots, carved bamboo slips are jumbled, and new dynasties burn the libraries of the old. The earliest surviving editions of Lao Tzu pre-date the first Chinese dictionaries by centuries, and those dictionaries only standardized terms of trade, not philosophy. So this book's words morphed invisibly over the centuries while, visibly, priesthoods rearranged the order of the text to suit the magical numbers they held sacred …

Eventually Lao Tzu became known as "the book of riddles" in China because no one can say what it originally meant, nor separate that meaning from those it acquired over time. So translations by modern scholars wildly disagree with each other – and with this one. The challenge of solving the old puzzle-box made Lao Tzu the most translated book in history.

As an Australian software engineer with neither Chinese roots nor Chinese language skills, I took up this quixotic pursuit in 1989 in collaboration with a community of sinology professors on the ANU's then new taoism-studies-l mailing list. My open-content "GNL" translation – a play of words on Stallman's GNU project – aimed to cut this Gordian knot by translating from English to English. Distilling the most popular English translations into one simple draft an amateur like me could grasp but none of those expert sinologists would refute.

The professors were sensibly skeptical about this working, but entertained enough to take the time to school me as I tried. Eternal gratitude to Prof. Dan Lusthaus in particular for his patience at that time. Over three years the GNL project succeeded to the extent that, unprompted, chinapage.org, the most popular English-language Chinese website of the 20th century, adopted the GNL as their official translation of Lao Tzu. The open content license may have had something to do with that too.

Then the going got weird.

In 1998, Joel and Ethan Coen produced *The Big Lebowski*, fusing Bogart noir The Big Sleep with a 1980s Hunter Thompson take on a 4th century Japanese Zen koan, *The Vinegar Tasters*, in which avatars of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Buddha met over a jar of sour wine.

"It is bitter," says Buddha, "but life is suffering. We should drink it."

"This wine is spoiled." says Confucius, "It is unacceptable. We should tip it out."

"Man," says Lao Tzu, "this stuff would go great in a salad dressing. Or with dumplings!"

The bitter beverage in the Coens' movie was coffee instead of vinegar, but the movie's sentiment is the same. So I should have seen what was coming when a Californian uber-fan of the film named Oliver Benjamin reached out in 2004 to ask if he could re-use the GNL as the bible of his "Church of he Latter Day Dude" under the title "Dude De Ching".

I told Oliver about the open content license and he agreed to give the book away free. Which, to his credit, he did … while selling a half million "Dudeist Priest" certificates each authorizing its bearer to perform weddings and funerals. Self-styled High Dudely Lama Oliver retired on the proceeds to live like a king in Chiang Mai.

I dig the Dude's story and admire the Lama, but I had to ask myself whether this was really the outcome I'd had in mind for this book. I'm down for bowling, bathrobes and White Russians, but was that all this was supposed to be about?

There's a zen koan, "If you meet Buddha on the road, kill him." While Buddhists are as wonderfully worshipful, their practice isn't about the name, image, identity, story or likeness of the Buddha. The moment those turn up they're an obstacle to enlightenment.

The Coens and the Lama weren't wrong; the Sage the GNL talked about, same as almost all the other English translations of Lao Tzu, sounds one hundred percent like the Dude. That meant there was

nothing for it; if I was going up against the Dude – or at least telling you what I'm blathering about – I would have to go back to the Chinese and translate it from scratch.

# The Chinaman is not the issue here.

Except that's impossible. My expertise is in building systems, coaching teams, and helping organizations accelerate throughput. What could I bring to Chinese translation that generations of sinologists and native speakers hadn't? Translating English to English is in my wheelhouse. Chinese was not.

Or at least it wasn't until two new translations came out and completely changed what I thought I was doing.

The first was from Sanskrit scholar Prof. Victor Mair. Mair is best known for his archaeology of the cryptid mummies of China's Tarim basin. Red-haired caucasian giants wearing tartan and witches' hats and riding the first domesticated horses into China from the West about 2000 BCE …

In 1990 Prof. Mair published an English translation of the oldest editions of Lao Tzu then known – a pair of silk scrolls that had been unearthed at a place called Ma Wang Dui. I liked Mair's translation just fine, but what turned me round was his discovery of deep philological connections between these editions of Lao Tzu and the Bhagavad Gita, the root text of Indian Yoga. Reviewing these systematically, Mair concluded that either one of those books is a bad translation of the other, or both come from some lost, probably pre-literate, earlier tradition.

Just as Mair's revelations were published a still older bamboo-carved edition of Lao Tzu was discovered in another Chinese dig at Guo Dian. Pre-dating the invention of paper and silk, this copy lacked half the length of the Ma Wang Dui scrolls. Assuming it was not cherry-picked by lazy grave robbers, where did the other half of it come from?

Maybe the Tao rode into China with Mair's giant witches. Maybe it began as a Chinese commentary on the Gita mixed up some old folk songs. Maybe the whole mess has been back-translated a couple

more times we just don't know about yet.

In any case it became clear to me I'd been barking up a tree that isn't there. I thought I was leveraging the insights of experts in ancient Chinese to reveal the intents of an ancient Chinese author. I was worried my work, much less the Dudely Lama's Lebowskified gloss of it, would obscure the original meaning. If this text wasn't originally Chinese, however, or if it didn't originate with just one author, it seemed I hadn't taken too many liberties at all. I'd taken too few.

We're solving a puzzle, we translators, east and west, maybe the wickedest in history. Though we know this book's a jumble, we reverently pick up piece after piece, polish each by choosing words we believe reveal its context, and then carefully replace each piece right back in the jumble where we got it. Over and over for thousands of years, trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle without ever rearranging the pieces to form a picture.

The wrong-headedness of this process gobsmacked me. Robert Henricks in his 1982 "On the Chapter Divisions in the Lao-Tzu" found that, among hundreds of translations of the book, only a handful dared rearrange it into a consistent whole.

Still the Chinese was all I had and learning Chinese, much less deciphering its unrecorded etymology, was clearly biting off more than I could hope to chew before I dropped dead of a reasonably old age. Any such effort would be foolish and I was stuck with what I had …

Until 2009 when Bradford Hatcher produced the first ever complete English transliteration of the Tao, *Laozi Word by Word*. Hatcher had made his own translation on top of this transliteration, but the great benefit to me was that his appendices listed all reasonable English meanings of every Chinese pictogram in the Lao Tzu. With cross-references covering all variations across all the ancient Chinese editions including both Ma Wang Dui and Guo Dian.

With Hatcher's work as a base I was back in the business of trans-

lating English into English while still keeping the work directly connected to historical evidence. And it was in studying Hatcher's transliteration that I found out I wasn't in fact the most unlikely person to translate this book, but uniquely qualified by my professional experience to do so.

In Hatcher I finally saw that the Sage – the Coens' Dude – is Chinese *sheng ren*. *Ren* meaning person or people or polity, and *sheng* perceptive, intuitive, or, per the rhyme of the second chapter of the Chinese, harmonious and lively. Perceptive, intuitive, harmonious, lively … Lao Tzu was literally writing about agility. And, of all its translators, I'm the only one with three decades professional experience as an agile coach.

Rendering *sheng ren* as Sage, some enlightened hermit, takes away the book's application to everyday humans. If it isn't about a long-haired mystic, but advice for ordinary people, it becomes a simple way to help us all work together when push comes to shove.

# How Lao Tzu rode to the West - and what he found there

As with most religious figures, most likely there was no historical person named Lao Tzu. The name means only "old philosopher" or "old philosophy".

Still there are many stories about him. In 500 BCE, Han dynasty Grand Historian Ssu-Ma Chi'en wrote that Lao Tzu was a Chou dynasty librarian escaping civil war. On a mountain pass smothered in snow, border guard Yin Hsi demanded he record his learning for posterity before traveling to the West, and the *Tao Te Ching* is the result.

It took quite a while for the old guy to get here. Our earliest Western edition of Lao Tzu is *The Monadology* from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the 18th century. Inspired by translations sent by a Jesuit mission to China though seldom recognized itself as Lao Tzu, The Monadology informed all Leibniz's inventions from the calculus to the binary number system and the first mechanical arithmetic computer.

Leibniz's work made its way to Russia in the curriculum of the Academy of Vienna, which Peter The Great salvaged after Newton's accusations of plagiarism ended Leibniz's credibility. That curriculum led to the famed cold-war Russian facility with math, and, according to logician Kurt Goedel, a Russian conspiracy that keeps Leibniz's "Characteristica Universalis" a state secret to this day.

Leibniz's binary numbers led to Babbage and Lovelace's invention of the stored-program computer, and then to Turing and Von Neumann's electronic computers, the information revolution, the Internet, and the Manifesto for Agile Software Development.

## Meanwhile, in the East …

Lao Tzu as glossed by Bodhidharma became the basis of Ch'an Buddhism, better known today by its Japanese name, Zen. Japanese efforts to translate the scrambled Lao Tzu inspired the study of *koans*, insoluble riddles whose frustrated contemplation yields the Zen path to enlightenment.

In the fifteenth Century, *Sen No Rikyu*'s invention of the Japanese Teahouse and *Mu Hin Shu* – "no host, no guest" – had the effect of ending two centuries of civil war and ushering in the Tokugawa shogunate. A century later, a forged book, *Namporoku* inextricably linked Zen to Tea and led to *Shu Ha Ri*, a certification system that spread through the martial arts and eventually the agile software development method too.

Teaism …

Taoism, Zenism, Teaism and martial systems rendered through the lens of Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa made their way to the West again in Randall's Doctor Lao, Lucas's Force, the Wachowskis' Matrix, the dream space of Nolans' Inception, and the Coens' Dude. And in Beatles lyrics and Jobs' design philosophy at Apple … and on and on. Lao Tzu arrived eventually.

# From English To English

We appear on the verge of a technological singularity in which silicon becomes smarter than carbon and the rate of progress accelerates beyond human comprehension. This book might even be the last translation of the Tao written by a human for humans. At least I employed no AI in writing it and AI seems today still incapable of fully grokking it. Though I hope our robot overlords also get good use from it as they come to face the same challenges in their communities we have in ours. And that we face in merging with them …

To be clear, although it employs agile terminology and the order of the text is different, this translation maps line for line onto the Chinese as per Hatcher, the roman numerals in each of the chapters here provide a key to compare it with the traditional 81-chapter structure.

As to how this new structure came about, it evolved just as if solving any ordinary jigsaw. Only much slower because the constraints are so much looser and the dimensionality so much higher.

I began by grouping key stanzas by the commonalities I'd learnt working with the GNL version. I then refactored each grouping into a poem with a form consonant with chapters that seem to stand alone. Then I analyzed and re-ordered the result into consistent narrative through-lines, refactoring these over and over until I could see no way to improve them.

The 6x11 symmetry that results has deeply surprised me. I imagined there must be gaps and discontinuities that line by line refactoring wouldn't overcome. Whether 6x11 reflects the original form of this work, there's no way to know, but ironing out the wrinkles I operated on the assumption that it does so. I don't believe this compromised the correspondence with the Chinese, nor that my unorthodox choices of metaphor have done so.

The 6-part scheme conforms with the subtitle of this book – *connect, adapt, simplify*. With each of these three we have a yang section and a yin section, one more focused on practice and the other more on experience. This yin/yang is reversed in the third part to make the book more accessible in leaving the most philosophically challenging content to its end. And the chapter titles are mine – the Chinese has no chapter titles, nor even chapter markers, and only rudimentary punctuation.

Throughout this work I found myself repeating these editing patterns over and over:

### Distinguish Duplicates

Two Chinese lines are identical or nearly identical. **Therefore,** look at the flow of the stanza to find the most significant distinction the duplication could reasonably suggest. As each pictograph admits many meanings, specialize or generalize these duplicate terms so the relation between them contributes value to the whole.

### Join Fragments

A short chapter doesn't complete an idea. **Therefore,** look for fragments to join with it to complete it. Also try to find non-sequitur or redundant stanzas that can be broken out of a longer chapter without detracting from its meaning, which might meaningfully recombine with this one.

### Refuse Doggerel

Sometimes all the dictionary meanings provide insufficient significance to make more than a Hallmark-style platitude. **Therefore,** examine the Chinese and English etymology of the pictograph in context to elicit more specific meanings.

### Undo Glosses

On review or in a new context it seems older translation choices have taken excessive liberties or lack a clear correspondence with the Chinese. **Therefore,** Retranslate from scratch, paying close attention to usage revealed by the new context.

### Respect Dictionaries – Unless You Can't

There's a particular word that gums up the works in numerous places. As the earliest dictionaries came long after the earliest editions of Lao Tzu, the idea that dictionary definitions exhaust translation possibilities shouldn't be taken to extremes. **Therefore,** Examine the effect of trying a novel translation of a word in all its contexts throughout the the text. If the majority of them break apart, start over.

### Swap Stanzas

The bamboo editions of the book mark no chapters or stan-

zas per se, just occasional punctuation, so it was not unlikely historical transcribers got their knots wrong and created accidental transpositions. Not just for adjacent lines, but whole stanzas. And the numerologists did the same intentionally. So sometimes it's clear that the beginning of a poem has been transposed with its middle or its conclusion. **Therefore,** if and only if you can't find a way to make a chapter read right as it is, try swapping the order of a pair of adjacent stanzas.

### Agile In, Agile Out

Translating *sheng ren* as agility places this translation in a very specific context. Many traditional translation choices read as flowery orientalism that obscures pragmatic application to an everyday context. **Therefore,** don't be afraid to employ words and phrases derived from the modern agile development lexicon if and only if they work as faithful translations of the Chinese.

# On The Way

Most English editions of Lao Tzu either leave the word *Tao* untranslated or render it as *The Way*. This choice has become so orthodox that any other may seem a kind of heresy. Unfortunately, *The Way* makes English translations clumsy throughout; it makes the first line of what is traditionally the first chapter – 56 here – hyperliterally, "The Way that can be Way-ed isn't really the Way". No translator can be satisfied with that.

I worried this word like a kid tonguing a wobbly tooth until one cool autumn in 2004 beneath a golden rain tree in the donkey paddock of my teahouse in the rainforest in Limpinwood, Australia, the tooth fell out.

A golden rain tree loses all its flowers in just a few days. As I curried Josephine, the donkey, our bees bothered the blossoms and the petals floated down around us like snowflakes. It seemed as close as I would ever get to sitting in an antique Chinese woodcut.

In a flash I saw the fallen petals Josephine trampled into mud weren't dying but transforming into soil to feed next spring's buds. Moments in a cycle connecting this tree with all the trees in the valley. Over deep time the loam fed roots and lichen, carving veins of mist and wind into the hills around us.

Dig your fingers in the soil and interlace them with worms and fungi. Wake to the hum of a city as its people build it around themselves. See stars older and more numerous than you can count whorling across the night. Watch Lao Tzu wriggling its way through a hundred generations of hands and eyes as a poem writing itself.

What is Tao? Not life as the life you live, nor the distinction between petals and dirt, but a physical flowing on all scales from the whispy tips of Josephine's ears to streams of stars burning through the darkness to silhouette the flowers.

Peter Merel
Tasmania, 2025

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