

Scripture of Clarity and Tranquility

Translated by Bruce R. Linnell, PhD (2011)

The biggest problem in translating Chinese is that each symbol can mean a multitude of different things. Once the meanings of each word are known, the translator's job is to pick one specific meaning for each symbol, and then arrange the words into a coherent, meaningful sentence. Sometimes that's easy, sometimes not so much. Often, translators just try to get the general "feel" of what the Chinese is trying to say, and then write an English sentence that means about the same thing. What I tried to do (for no other reason than to see if it could be done) was to preserve as much of the original Chinese as possible by always using each symbol in the English sentence, and an exact translation of each symbol wherever possible. Occasionally more than one English meaning for a symbol fits equally well, and the translator must pick just one. However, I sometimes took both meanings and combined them into a single phrase, such as "heart/mind", or "deep and mysterious". I also often used a slightly different word if it read better and didn't change the meaning very much (like "smallest" instead of "very small"), or used a more common word instead of an obscure one (like "meaning" instead of "purport"). However, I always interpreted idioms (like "ocean of misery", "six desires", "three poisons") for clarity, since they mean nothing to the modern English reader.

What follows shows just how exact the translation for each line is. It shows every reasonable meaning for each symbol, the interpretations I made (and what the exact translation was), what extra words I added, and where I combined multiple meanings into one phrase.

The following key describes how to read what follows :

underline = exact translation of symbol

both = blended exact translations from one symbol

² = a two-symbol word

italics = interpreted translation of symbol; exact is in [brackets]

[words] = English words added for clarity

blue = Buddhist concept

老君曰

old/experienced king/ruler/lord/gentleman/ideal man call/say/speak

Lao Zi said :

大道無形

great/vast dao/path/way/to speak not/without form/shape/look/appear

The great Dao is without form,

生育天地

produce/create/birth/life nourish/raise/give birth heaven earth/land/place

Yet it creates and nourishes heaven and earth.

大道無情

great/vast dao/path/way/to speak not/without /feeling/emotion/passion/situation/condition/nature

The great Dao is without feeling,

運行日月

[to move/to transport/to use/to apply/fortune/luck/fate/ conduct/behavior]to act/do/work/perform/travel]

day/sun /moon/month/

Yet it moves² the sun and moon.

大道無名

great/vast dao/path/way/to speak not/without name/fame/reputation/title

The great Dao is without name,

長養萬物

long/forever/constantly|elder/leader/chief raise/support/birth ten thousand thing/creature

Yet it forever supports the ten thousand creatures.

吾不知其名

i/we (do)not know/knowledge/understand it(s)/his/their name/fame/reputation/title

I do not know its name.

強名曰道

strong/powerful/better|try/make effort/strive|inflexible/stubborn/unyielding name/fame/reputation/title

call/say/speak dao/path/way/to speak

If I tried to name it, I would call it “Dao”.

夫道者

man/those/now: dao/path/way/to speak they who/he who have/possess/being/exist/to be/

pure/clear/clean/complete have/possess/being/exist/to be/ muddy/dirty(water)/turbid/impure

Now : [all] that which Dao[s]

[he who]

有清有濁

Is clear, is turbid,

有動有靜

have/possess/being/exist/to be/ move(ment)/action/change/act/use have/possess/being/exist/to be/

tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

Is active, is tranquil.

[movement.action]

天清地濁

heaven pure/clear/clean/complete earth/land/place muddy/dirty(water)/turbid/impure

Heaven is clear, earth is turbid.

天動地靜

heaven move(ment)/action/change/act/use earth/land/place tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

Heaven is active, earth is tranquil.

[movement.action]

男清女濁

/male/ pure/clear/clean/complete /female/woman/ muddy/dirty(water)/turbid/impure

Male is clear, female is turbid.

男動女靜

/male/ move(ment)/action/change/act/use /female/woman/ tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

Male is active, female is tranquil.

[movement.action]

降本流末

drop/fall/descend/lower|surrender/subdue root/origin/source/foundation flow/spread/circulate/drift/wander

end/final/latter/tip/end

Descending from the source, flowing to the extremities,

[end]

而生萬物

yet/but/and(then) produce/create/birth/life ten thousand thing/creature

And the ten thousand creatures are born.

清者濁之源

pure/clear/clean/complete they who/he who muddy/dirty(water)/turbid/impure 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod->/root/source/origin/

That which is clear is the origin of turbidity.

[he who]

動者靜之基

move(ment)/action/change/act/use they who/he who tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod-> base/foundation/origin/root

That which is active is the root of tranquility.

[he who] [movement, action]

人能常清靜

people/mankind can/able/capable/competent eternal/constant/always pure/clear/clean/complete tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

When people are able to be constantly clear and tranquil,

天地悉皆歸

heaven earth/land/place in all cases/know|investigate thoroughly all/every(one)|in all cases return/revert

Heaven and earth will always return to everyone.

[in all cases]

夫人神好清

man/those/now: people/mankind spirit/soul/deity/supernatural/mystical/miraculous good/excellent/well/very much/can/be easy to|fond of/be liable to pure/clear/clean/complete

Now : the human spirit is fond of clarity,

[people]

而心擾之

yet/but/and(then) heart/mind /disturb/ 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod->

But the heart/mind disturbs it.

人心好靜

people/mankind heart/mind good/excellent/well/very much/can/be easy to|fond of/be liable to tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

The human heart/mind is fond of tranquility,

[people]

而慾牽之

yet/but/and(then) /desire/wish/ /lead along/| to haul, drag, influence(B)|involve/affect 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod->

But desires interfere with it.

[lead,influence]

常能遣其慾

eternal/constant/always can/able/capable/competent /dispatch/|to send, drive away [2 3]|exile/banish it(s)/his/their /desire/wish/

Be able to constantly discard your desires,

[dispatch,drive away,banish] [his]

而心自靜

yet/but/and(then) heart/mind themselves/oneself/since/naturally tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

And your heart/mind will naturally be tranquil.

澄其心

/clear/limpid/settle(liquid)/ it(s)/his/their heart/mind

Settle your heart/mind,

[his]

而神自清

yet/but/and(then) spirit/soul/deity/supernatural/mystical/miraculous themselves/oneself/since/naturally pure/clear/clean/complete

And your spirit will naturally be clear.

自然六慾不生

[themselves/oneself/since/naturally correct/right/likethis/most certainly] six /desire/wish/passion, desire (do)not produce/create/birth/life

Then naturally² the six desires do not arise,

[produced,created]

三毒消滅

three poison(ous) consume/news/subside/to disappear/to vanish/melt, disperse, expend, digest, dispose of [2 3]|eliminate/need extinguish/wipe out/destroy/overthrow

And the three poisons subside and are extinguished.

所以

Therefore² :

不能者

[place/actually/that which thus/because/in order to/use/by means of] (do)not can/able/capable/competent they who/he who

He who is not able [to do so] –

為心未澄

act/action/make/become/to be/to do/serve as/because of/for/to/ heart/mind not yet/did not/have not /clear/limpid/settle(liquid)/

[This is] because his heart/mind has not yet settled,

慾未遣也

/desire/wish/ not yet/did not/have not /dispatch/|to send, drive away [2 3] !(2)/-/eol

His desires have not yet been discarded !

[dispatch,drive away,banish]

能遣之者

can/able/capable/competent /dispatch/|to send, drive away [2 3] 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod-> they who/he who

He who is able to discard them :

[dispatch,drive away,banish]

內觀其心

/inside/inner/internal/within/interior/ see/observe/behold/sights/to look at/to look into,examine,contemplate it(s)/his/their heart/mind

Within : he looks at his heart/mind,

Within : he contemplates his heart/mind,

心無其心

heart/mind not/without it(s)/his/their heart/mind

[And sees that this] heart/mind is not his heart/mind.

外觀其形

outside/foreign/external see/observe/ behold/sights/|to look at/|to look into,examine,contemplate it(s)/his/their form/shape/look/appear

Outside : he looks at his form,

Outside : he contemplates his form,

形無其形

form/shape/look/appear not/without it(s)/his/their form/shape/look/appear

[And sees that this] form is not his form.

遠觀其物

far/distant/remote/profound see/observe/ behold/sights/|to look at/|to look into,examine,contemplate it(s)/his/their thing/creature

In the distance : he looks at his things,

In the distance : he contemplates his things,

物無其物

thing/creature not/without it(s)/his/their thing/creature

[And sees that these] things are not his things.

三者既悟

three they who/he who already/since/now that/|both...and.../actually /comprehend/|awaken to,become aware[2 3]

He who actually comprehends these three,

He who actually awakens to these three,

唯見於空

only/alone|yes see|discern|observe/perceive|meet/opinion in/at/to/from/by/than/out of/to/compared to/from/in/at/by/on|then/than/|at/in/|/at/in/in regard to/ /air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void

Only finds² emptiness,

[meets with]

觀空亦空

see/observe/ behold/sights/|to look at/|to look into,examine,contemplate /air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void also/too/likewise /air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void

[And] sees that emptiness is also empty.

空無所空

air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void not/without place/actually/that which air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void

[If] that which is emptiness was not actually empty,

所空既無

place/actually/that which /air/sky/empty/in vain/emptiness/void already/since/now that/|both...and.../actually not/without

[Then] that which is emptiness would actually be non-existent.

無無亦無

not/without not/without also/too/likewise not/without

[And if] non-existence was not also non-existent,

無無既無

not/without not/without already/since/now that/both...and.../actually not/without
[Then] non-existence would not actually be non-existence.

湛然常寂

deep/profound correct/right/like this/most certainly eternal/constant/always
still/quiet/silent/lonesome/solitary/calm/tranquil

In this way, there is deep and profound constant stillness.

[thus,like this]

寂無所寂

still/quiet/silent/lonesome/solitary/calm/tranquil not/without place/actually/that which
still/quiet/silent/lonesome/solitary/calm/tranquil

[If that which is] stillness was not actually still,

慾豈能生

/desire/wish/ how can it be that/how/what can/able/capable/competent produce/create/birth/life

How can it be that desire is able to arise ?

[be produced,created]

慾既不生

/desire/wish/ already/since/now that/both...and.../actually (do)not produce/create/birth/life

Once desire does not arise,

[now that,since] [produced,created]

即是真靜

/namely/right away/to approach/to draw near/at once/promptly/immediately this is/it is/is/correct
real/true/genuine tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

Immediately there is true tranquility.

真常應物

real/true/genuine eternal/constant/always should/must|answer/respond|comply/agree|meet/supply thing/creature

[That which is] true and constant is to *cooperate* with [all] creatures;

[respond,comply,agree]

[That which is] true and eternal is to *cooperate* with [all] creatures;

[respond,comply,agree]

真常得性

real/true/genuine eternal/constant/always obtain/gain/get|have /sex/nature/|the nature as unchanging; also as
independent; fundamental nature behind expression; buddha-nature immanent in all beings [2 3]|essence/self-
nature/inner essence

[That which is] true and constant is to *realize* your own nature. [obtain]

[That which is] true and eternal is to *realize* your own nature. [obtain]

常應常靜

eternal/constant/always should/must|answer/respond|comply/agree|meet/supply eternal/constant/always
tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife

[By being] constantly cooperative, constantly tranquil,

[respond,comply,agree]

常清靜矣

eternal/constant/always pure/clear/clean/complete tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife
!/?/<very>/eol

[You realize] constant clarity and tranquility !

如此清靜

[as good as/as if/like this/these] pure/clear/clean/complete tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife
In this way², using clarity and tranquility,

漸入真道

/imbue/gradual/gradually/ enter/join/get|awaken to the truth [1 3]|come into/arrive/reach real/true/genuine
dao/path/way/to speak

You gradually enter true Dao.

You gradually awaken to the true Way.

既入真道

already/since/now that/both...and.../actually enter/join/get|awaken to the truth [1 3] real/true/genuine
dao/path/way/to speak

Once [you have] entered true Dao,

[now that,since]

Once [you have] awakened to the true Way,

[now that,since]

名為得道

[name/fame/reputation/title act/action/make/become/tobe/to do/serve as|because of/for/to/] obtain/gain/get|have
dao/path/way/to speak

You are named as² realizing Dao.

[obtaining]

You are named as² realizing the Way.

[obtaining]

雖名得道

altho/even tho/even if name/fame/reputation/title obtain/gain/get|have dao/path/way/to speak

Although you are named as realizing Dao,

[obtaining]

Although you are named as realizing the Way,

[obtaining]

實無所得

true/real/solid/honest/fruit/solid/sincere [not/without place/actually/that which] obtain/gain/get|have

In truth there is nothing² to realize.

[obtain]

為化眾生

act/action/make/become/tobe/to do/serve as|because of/for/to/ transform/change/convert|salvation into
buddhism [1 3]|convert to buddhism [multitude/masses/many/all produce/create/birth/life]

[Only when your] actions transform all living beings²

[Only when your] actions convert all living beings²

名為得道

[name/fame/reputation/title act/action/make/become/tobe/to do/serve as|because of/for/to/] obtain/gain/get|have
dao/path/way/to speak

Are you named as² realizing Dao.

[obtain]

Are you named as² realizing the Way.

[obtain]

能悟之者

can/able/capable/competent /comprehend|awaken to, become aware [2 3] 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod-> they
who/he who

[Only] he who is able to comprehend it

[Only] he who is able to awaken to it

可傳聖道

can/able /to pass on/to spread/to transmit/to transfer/to circulate/ holy/sacred/sage dao/path/way/to speak

Can transmit sacred Dao [to others].

Can transmit the holy Way [to others].

老君曰

old/experienced king/ruler/lord/gentleman/ideal man call/say/speak

Lao Zi said :

上士無爭

high(est)/above/superior warrior/scholar|gentleman,officer [1 3] not/without strive/struggle/fight/argue

The superior scholar* does not strive.

下士好爭

under/below/low/inferior warrior/scholar |gentleman,officer [1 3] good/excellent/well/very much/can/be easy to/fond of/be liable to strive/struggle/fight/argue

The inferior scholar is fond of striving.

上德不德

high(est)/above/superior de/virtue/power (do)not de/virtue/power

[A man of] superior De does not [use his] De.

下德執德

under/below/low/inferior de/virtue/power hold/grasp/maintain/persist|obstinate de/virtue/power

[A man of] inferior De clings to [his] De.

[hold,grasp]

執著之者

hold/grasp/maintain/persist|obstinate /catch/receive/suffer// -ing (indicates an action in progress)//to make known/to show/to prove/[attachment,attached 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)]mod-> they who/he who

He who clings and is attached to them

[hold,grasp]

不明道德眾生

(do)not bright/clear/understand/eyesight/insight|enlightenment; buddha-wisdom [1 3] dao/path/way/to speak de/virtue/power [multitude/masses/many/all produce/create/birth/life]

Does not understand Dao and De and all living beings².

所以

[place/actually/that which thus/because/in order to/use/by means of]

Therefore² :

不得真道者

(do)not obtain/gain/get|have real/true/genuine dao/path/way/to speak they who/he who

He who [has] not realized true Dao –

[obtain]

He who [has] not realized the true Way –

[obtain]

為有妄心

act/action/make/become/to be/to do/serve as|/because of/for/to/ have/possess/being/exist/to be/ foolish/absurd/false/rash heart/mind

[This is] because he has a foolish heart/mind.

既有妄心

already/since/now that/both...and.../actually have/possess/being/exist/to be/ foolish/absurd/false/rash heart/mind

Once he has a foolish heart/mind,

[now that,since]

即驚其神

/namely/right away/to approach/to draw near/at once/promptly/immediately frighten/scare/surprise/alarm it(s)/his/their spirit/soul/deity/supernatural/mystical/miraculous

Immediately his spirit is alarmed.

既驚其神

already/since/now that/both...and.../actually frighten/scare/surprise/alarm it(s)/his/their spirit/soul/deity/supernatural/mystical/miraculous

Once his spirit is alarmed,

[now that,since]

即著萬物

namely/right away/to approach/to draw near/at once/promptly/immediately /catch/receive/suffer/|-ing (indicates an action in progress)/to make known/to show/to prove/attachment,attached ten thousand thing/creature

Immediately [he becomes] attached to the ten thousand things.

既著萬物

already/since/now that/both...and.../actually /catch/receive/suffer/|-ing (indicates an action in progress)/to make known/to show/to prove attachment,attached ten thousand thing/creature

Once [he becomes] attached to the ten thousand things,

[now that,since]

即生貪求

namely/right away/to approach/to draw near/at once/promptly/immediately produce/create/birth/life greedy/passion, vehement longing or desire|desire; desire for, greed|voracious desire seek/request|to search, pursue, endeavor, investigate(all strongly)

Immediately [insatiable] desire and seeking arise.

[produced,created]

(the word added in brackets is implied by the symbol)

既生貪求

already/since/now that/both...and.../actually produce/create/birth/life greedy/passion, vehement longing or desire|desire; desire for, greed|voracious desire seek/request|to search, pursue, endeavor, investigate(all strongly)

Once [insatiable] desire and seeking arise,

[now that,since] [produced,created]

(the word added in brackets is implied by the symbol)

即是煩惱

/namely/right away/to approach/to draw near/at once/promptly/immediately this is/it is/is/correct [/feel vexed/to bother/trouble, annoyance,perplexity /get mad/|vexation, irritation, annoyance]

Immediately there are afflictions².

煩惱妄想

/feel vexed/to bother/trouble, annoyance,perplexity /get mad/| vexation, irritation, annoyance foolish/absurd/false/rash /to think/to believe/to suppose/to wish/to want/to miss/to consider

Afflictions² and foolish thinking

憂苦身心

sad/grief/worry/sorrow,grief,melancholy,anxiety /bitter/intensely/miserable/painful/|<dukha>, suffering, pain,distress,misery self/body heart/mind

Worry and suffer your body and heart/mind.

便遭濁辱

/ordinary/plain/convenient/handy/easy/then/so/thus//advantageous/cheap/|soon after /a time/a turn(related to time)/incident/meet by chance/|suffer/be victimized|meet with/encounter/come across muddy/dirty(water)/turbid/impure insult/disgrace/humiliate(ion)

Then you *fall into* turbidity and disgrace,

[encounter,suffer]

流浪生死

flow/spread/circulate/drift/wander /wave/breaker/unrestrained/dissipated/ [produce/create/birth/life die/to die/inpassable/uncrossable/inflexible/rigid/]

Drifting² from birth to death,

Drifting² thru [the cycles of] birth and death,

(the words added in brackets are implied by the symbols)

常沈苦海

eternal/constant/always /sink/|to sink; heavy [2 3]|submerge

[/bitter/intensely/miserable/painful/|<dukha>,suffering,pain,distress,misery ocean/sea]

Eternally submerged in the ocean of misery²,

永失真道

/forever/always/perpetual(ly)/ lose/mistake/fail/neglect real/true/genuine dao/path/way/to speak

Forever losing true Dao.

Forever losing the true Way.

真常之道

real/true/genuine eternal/constant/always 's/it(s)/him/them(obj)|mod-> dao/path/way/to speak

The Dao of [that which is] true and constant

The Way of [that which is] true and eternal

悟者自得

/comprehend/|awaken to, become aware [2 3] they who/he who themselves/oneself/since/naturally obtain/gain/get|have

Is naturally realized by he who comprehends.

[obtain]

Is naturally realized by he who awakens.

[obtain]

得悟道者

obtain/gain/get|have /comprehend/|awaken to, become aware [2 3] dao/path/way/to speak they who/he who

He who realizes and comprehends Dao

[obtain]

He who realizes and awakens to the Way

[obtain]

常清靜矣

eternal/constant/always pure/clear/clean/complete tranquil/peace/calm/still/quiet|cessation of strife !/?/<very>/eol

Is constantly pure and tranquil !