

# A Modern Visual Tao Language

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I recall the first lines of *Tao Te Ching* that caution us to remember that words do not carry ultimate truth:

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.*

*The name that can be named is not the eternal name.*

In spite of that, I sit here at my keyboard, making words by pressing the letters beneath my fingers. I am attempting to put into words what it is that I have been doing, for about fifty years, as I have woven together the text of *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters* and my own writings with the many photographs I have made, images of nature and occasionally of human-made things.

## Beginnings

The start of my awareness of things Asian or Oriental came from items in the old New England home where I grew up. There were a few beautiful dishes, that I handled while setting the table for dinner and while drying dishes after dinner, that had “China” inscribed on their backs. There was my grandmother’s blue and white everyday dishes that were willow ware—at that young age I made no distinction between China and Japan.

Also there were interesting pictures hanging on the wall for which my grandfather had made wooden frames, including this image of the torii gate at the Itsukushima-Shrine on the southwest coast of Japan, and the small tapestry of



cats given to my grandfather in 1927 by one of his Chinese students at MIT where he taught.

## Next Steps

While at Mount Holyoke College in the early 1960's I majored in physics. I liked "making things" and both my father and grandfather were in engineering, electrical and mechanical respectively. In my junior year I took a course in quantum physics that both inspired and puzzled me. The story of how that led me to Tao is detailed in my 1999 book, *Fingers Pointing to the Moon* in the chapters, "A Science Autobiography" and "Science and Transformation."



While earning a PhD in physics at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960's I read many of Alan Watts' books and picked up my first copy of *Tao Te Ching* from a book rack in the local drug store. During that time I also began my work in black-and-white photography, using the well-equipped student darkroom at the student union. Photography came naturally to me, as while I was growing up there had been on our walls black-and-white nature photographs made by my grandfather who at MIT in the early 1900's had access to a darkroom there.

It was in 1970 while I was doing post-doctoral sub-atomic particle physics research at a particle accelerator laboratory at University of California Berkeley that I first met my late husband, Gia-fu Feng. I visited Stillpoint, his meditation center/commune in the Santa Cruz mountains of California. In early summer, I left Wisconsin and moved to Stillpoint, sharing Gia-fu's cabin at his invitation.

## At Stillpoint with Gia-fu Feng

The days at Stillpoint began early, with an hour of meditation culminating with an outburst of chanting as the sun peeked up above the horizon. After breakfast came a group meeting consisting of various discussions and a period of working on a translation of *Tao Te Ching*. Gia-fu made a literal translation to English of the characters in a traditional Chinese version. We who lived at Stillpoint read from other translations, and a lively discussion followed. We aimed for keeping the essence of the Chinese without copying the other translations. Through late summer and fall we took "full moon trips" of several days to various parks in California, sometimes as a group and sometimes just Gia-fu and me. In the high country of

Yosemite, I think in October 1970, Gia-fu suggested we become engaged, which we did in a simple impromptu ceremony recorded in this photo made by one of the group, using my camera.



On those trips Gia-fu and I took many long walks, often with no particular destination. He enjoyed walking in nature. Whenever I stopped to commune with and photograph some trees, rocks, water or view that caught my eye, he would just walk back and forth nearby. I felt no sense of being hurried. Perhaps we were simply being present, in Tao.

On Christmas Day 1970, Gia-fu and I drove north to San Francisco to visit his sisters, and then went on to Mill Valley to visit an old friend of his. Quite spontaneously that friend suggested he call Alan Watts and see if we might come to Alan's home and have him do a Buddhist wedding ceremony for us that evening. That was the only time I met Alan as he died a year or so later.

In May 1971, many of us who were living at Stillpoint moved to Vermont, to the town I came back to in 2002 and where I now live. We continued working on *Tao Te Ching*, and I had a delightful time making photographs of my native New England trees, plants and landscape. Every evening we walked out onto a grassy hillside and did our tai ji practice just before sunset.



Our decision to include my black-and-white photographs and his Chinese calligraphy with each chapter of the translation came to Gia-fu and me while taking a long walk on a dirt road in Vermont during that summer of 1971. Later on we each were sure we were the one who came up with that idea. Most likely the thought arose in each of us at the same time.

My contributions to our *Tao Te Ching* are the page design and the photographs. That is where I am competent; I am not a scholar of Taoism. Gia-fu had the Chinese language and experience with Chinese calligraphy and literature, and I had the images of nature.



1972 cover



2011 cover





When Gia-fu Feng<sup>1</sup> and I were negotiating our *Tao Te Ching* contract with Random House in 1971, he wanted the book to be his, with me getting just a small one-time fee for the use of my photos to illustrate his translation. Somehow, I had the courage to stand up for myself, to value my own creativity and insist that we be compensated equally, dividing the royalties 50-50. I overcame any tendency to defer to a man, to a person who was 23 years my senior, and to an elder who was learned in an ancient tradition I did not think I understood.

Some of the deference did creep back in over the years as this younger, white woman was often subtly questioned about my qualifications to speak with any authority about *Tao Te Ching*.

In 1971 Toinette Lippe, our editor at Random House, really cleaned up the translation our group had made and made it more readable. In 2011 Toinette came out of retirement and helped me make the text less patriarchal and more gender-neutral, like the original Chinese. That new edition has over a hundred new photographs made since 1972. In order to use Gia-fu's calligraphy on these new photographs, I went through a painstaking process of scanning the original halftone film from which the 1972 edition was made.

<sup>1</sup> For more about Gia-fu, see his biography, *Still Point of the Turning World: The Life of Gia-fu Feng*, written by Carol Ann Wilson.

In late fall 1971, as it got colder in Vermont, we moved on to Colorado. We used our book royalties to buy a big house at the foot of Pikes Peak. Each day we all walked many miles on the mountain trails that began at our back door. We also remodeled the house and built a sauna.

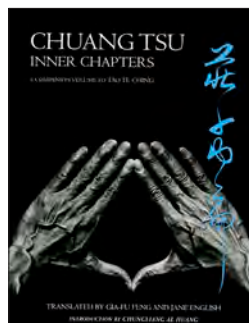


In Colorado we worked on our second book, *Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters*, published in 1974. It has had several editions with different publishers. I have delighted in replacing many photos each time with my latest images.

- Random House in 1974 – the original edition
- Earth Heart 1997 – many new photos
- Amber Lotus 2002 – a reprint of the Earth Heart edition
- Amber Lotus 2008– new photos – printed by mistake on uncoated paper
- Hay House 2014 – new photos, updated gender-neutral text, smaller format.
- DaoDog Press 2022 (forthcoming) -- new photos



1974



1997 & 2002



2022

## Calligraphy

During the four years I was with Gia-fu I did not learn any Chinese language, but I was fascinated with the shapes in his calligraphy. Just as in English where we have cursive and printed letters, his calligraphy style varied from neat and rectangular to flowing.

*Tao Te Ching - Chapter One*

道可道非常道  
 有名萬物之母  
 故常無欲以觀其妙  
 常有欲以觀其徼  
 此兩者同出而異名  
 同謂之元  
 元之又元  
 眾妙之門

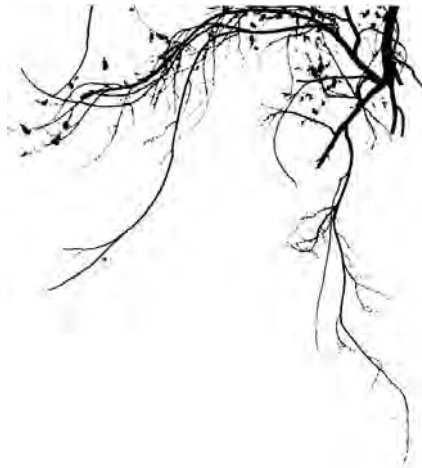
*Tao Te Ching - Chapter Thirty-Four*

大道汎兮其可左右  
 萬物恃之而生而不辭  
 功成不名有  
 衣養方物而不為主  
 常無欲可名於小  
 萬物恃之而不為主  
 可名於大  
 以天師不自為大  
 故能成方大

I realized that many of the photos of tree branches I had made even before meeting him reminded me of his calligraphy. Each kind of tree “spoke its own dialect.”



Once during the years I was with Gia-fu I dropped pine needles onto white poster board, seeing what “calligraphy” emerged that way. Then I photographed it. Another example is this photo of a drooping elm branch, made before I met Gia-fu. It resonates with the calligraphy he placed on the cover of *Chuang Tsu*.





## The “Dance” of Words and Images

My photographs are a visual “language” through which I express my own native experience of something that later on I learned to call “Tao.”

When the version of *Tao Te Ching* I did with Gia-fu Feng was first published in 1972, one reviewer commented that although the real Tao cannot be put into words, perhaps it could be photographed. While that has always seemed a bit “over the top” to me, there is perhaps a grain of truth in it.

There are at least three ways words and images can be used together. First, images can be used to illustrate and amplify what is in the words. Second, words can be used as captions to explain the images. And third, words and images can be in a synergistic flow where neither one dominates the other. The latter is the best description of what I have been doing in the Tao books.

In my books and calendars there is often no literal connection between the photographs and the text. I make a visual “story” that flows parallel to the text. I lay it out on the floor. I walk through it, moving parts around. This photograph is from 1997 when Chungliang Al Huang joined me in the process of choosing photographs for a new edition of *Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters*.



The sequence of images in a book is like a slow-motion movie. The large and small photographs on a two-page spread in a book or for a calendar month “talk” to each other. Each image stands in relation not only to the words and other images on the same two-page spread, but also to the images on the preceding and succeeding pages.

Another metaphor for the flow of words and images is a musical one, with melody, harmony and counterpoint. I find it hard to explain what I do in making a book or calendar—it is a felt thing.

An effect of interspersing images with the words is that the reader slows down. There is time for the words and images to “cook” a bit in the consciousness of the reader. I took this to an extreme on a few pages in my 2018 book, *A Rainbow of Tao*, where Chapter One of *Tao Te Ching* is stretched out over eight pages, each

page having a photograph and just one or two lines of text. I intended this to move the reader to read slowly, savoring the words and image before turning the page, experiencing more deeply the depth of the wisdom contained in that chapter.

One reads even more slowly in the annual *Tao Calendar* I have created since 1991 from pages of the books. I think of a calendar as “a book to be read very slowly, two pages per month.” One advantage of this is that, unlike reading a book, which requires you to have had the intention to open it, a calendar hanging on your wall can just catch your eye, sometimes with uncanny accuracy and relevance to the moment. I like this serendipity of “living with Tao.”

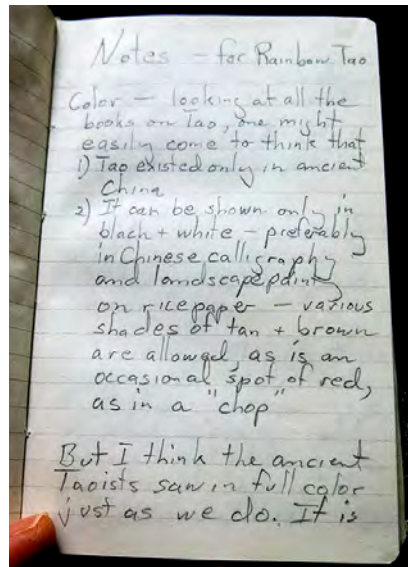
In making my 2018 book *A Rainbow of Tao* I intentionally chose a spiral binding so you can leave it open to a random page on your desk or shelf, allowing it to catch your eye as does a calendar on the wall.

## A Rainbow of Tao

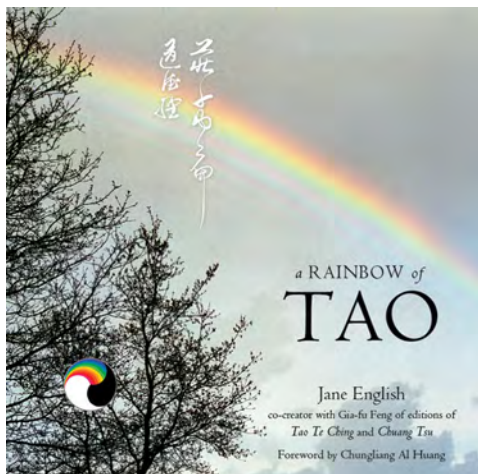
In 2003 my calendar publisher suggested that having lived so closely with Tao for so many years I might have something to say about it, so for a couple of years I kept a notebook of my Tao-related thoughts.

Having accumulated many full-color photographs, and having made three full-color books and several calendars of Mount Shasta, I began to wonder if perhaps I could use color images to go with Tao writings, my own and my favorite selections from *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu*. After working for a couple of years on the words and photos for such a book I set it aside about 2007, picking it up again about 2017, and finishing it in 2018. Initially I called it *Rainbow Tao*, but soon changed the title to *A Rainbow of Tao*.

Both the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu* books, as well as the first 27 years of the *Tao Calendar* featured my black-and-white photographs. Back in the late 1960's I used black-and-white film—hundred foot rolls of 35mm Kodak Tri-X from which I rolled off smaller 36-exposure rolls that fit my camera. During the



fifteen years (1987-2002) when I lived at the foot of Mount Shasta in far northern California I still had a darkroom and used Tri-X. When, about 1990, I got a desktop computer (a little beige-box Mac Classic) and scanners, first a flatbed then a slide scanner, I switched almost totally to using color slide film. It was so much easier to send off the film to be developed and then to scan the slides. I converted to gray-scale the images I wanted to use in black-and-white. Then just before I moved back to Vermont in 2002 I began to use a digital camera, again making photographs in color and converting to gray-scale occasionally. The last two pages of the 2011 edition of *Tao Te Ching* list the date, location and media type of all the photographs in the book.



For *A Rainbow of Tao* the layout process “graduated” from a floor to multiple tables and desks around my office.



I designed *A Rainbow of Tao* as something of a sandwich with the “slices of bread” being a linear essay about Tao at the beginning and another essay about Gia-fu’s and my work with *Tao Te Ching* at the end. The “juicy filling” in the middle consists of many full-color photographs interspersed with bits of text from *Tao Te Ching*, from *Chuang Tsu*, and from my own notes.

In his foreword to *A Rainbow of Tao*, Chungliang Al Huang speaks about my use of color photographs.

For many years, Jane English and I have shared the same appreciation and wish to transmit the ineffable Tao through poetry, movement and visual images. And I have admired her intuitive ways of revealing the Tao essence in so many of her inspiring photographs. In this special book, she has compiled for us a rainbow spectrum of visual wonders to marvel at and to meditate with. Through the images, together with her uniquely personal understanding and perceptions, she helps us with entering into the heart and soul of the living philosophy of *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*, two of the most important Tao classics.

Some may still prefer the Tao essence to remain plain and simple, austere black and white, but I am delighted that this time Jane has ventured into another dimension of expression, the full-color spectrum, with these marvelous visual images. This is just as nature has intended for our eyes to see, and it allows our spirits to soar.

I am rejoicing with this multi-colored Tao book, and inviting you to join me joyfully dancing inside, under and over this Rainbow of Tao.



In the Introduction to the book are my own thoughts about the use of color photographs:

Looking at most of the books on Tao, one might easily come to think that Tao existed only in ancient China and that it can be shown only in black and white, preferably through Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting on rice paper. Various shades of tan and brown are also allowed, as is an occasional spot of red. I followed this tradition with the black-and-white photography for the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu* books I did with Gia-fu Feng in 1972 and 1974.

But the ancient Taoists saw in full color just as we do. It is simply that their technology for expressing themselves was ink on paper. Now we have film, computers and color printing. In *A Rainbow of Tao* I use color photographs, including some that are contemporary with the black and white photographs used in *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu*. Black and white is yin-yang. Adding color changes this to yin-yang and the ten-thousand things—mother, father and the full spectrum of their children.

Working in color expanded to the *Tao Calendar*, as I was able to persuade my calendar publisher to do the *Tao Calendar* in full color, starting in 2018. A few people mourned the passing of the black-and-white versions, but most people welcomed the color.



## A Journey with Nature and Tao

After Gia-fu and I had created our two books we grew apart and went our separate ways in the summer of 1974. He was 23 years older than me and we came from really different worlds. It was good that we had come together to make the books, but that was now finished. He stayed in Colorado and I moved to the San Francisco area of California

Gia-fu died in 1985, shortly before I moved to far northern California, to the Mount Shasta area. It was there that about 1990, having begun to photograph that enormous mountain and to make an annual calendar using those images, that there arose in me the idea of also making a calendar based on the two books I had made with Gia-fu. When I spoke of this to a local bookseller, her reply was, “What took you so long?” Thus was born the annual *Tao Calendar* that I have now done for over thirty years.

At first the calendar, that for the first ten years I published myself through Earth Heart, was made directly from the halftone film of the books that I had bought from the publisher, my own negatives of the photographs having been burned in a fire back in 1978. After the advent of desktop publishing, I had the freedom to digitize Gia-fu’s calligraphy from the film and to use it on new photographs.

By 1997, the 25th anniversary of the publication of our *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tsu* book was out of print and the rights had reverted to me and to Gia-fu’s heir, his Colorado lawyer, the older sister of Carol Wilson, who later completed the biography he had begun to write before he died. I persuaded Random House to issue a 25th anniversary edition of *Tao Te Ching*, but could not get them to re-issue *Chuang Tsu*. So I did it myself.

After Gia-fu died I really appreciated the friendship and support of Chungliang Al Huang, and frequently visited his Living Tao Foundation events in Gold Beach, Oregon. From my home in Mount Shasta it was a four-hour drive to Gold Beach, some over dirt-road mountain shortcuts. When I decided to include parts of *Chuang Tsu*, as well as *Tao Te Ching*, in the calendars, Chungliang helped me divide the calligraphy from that much-more-text-heavy book into chunks that were small enough to fit gracefully on calendar pages.

Gia-fu had taught me how to use yarrow stalks with *I Ching*. While in Gold Beach I shared their use with Chungliang’s students and was particularly delighted when Chungliang’s sister asked me to teach her their use—I was giving back an ancient Chinese practice to a modern Chinese woman. See [eheart.com/yarrow](http://eheart.com/yarrow) for the yarrow stalk sets.



Looking back, I am grateful that on the night of September 10, 2001 I had been staying in the guest room of Living Tao Foundation's "River House." After breakfast on September 11th I had headed back up the Rogue River road and over the dirt mountain roads. I wandered slowly, stopping often to photograph the foggy hillsides, the trees and even a hawk. I was thus spared much of the real-time angst of that fateful day, not learning of the attacks until late afternoon (early evening Eastern time) when I stopped at my calendar printer near Medford, Oregon and found everyone watching TV. It seems my place was in the woods, not in the thick of a modern world gone mad.



Now, as I write this in the fall of 2021, it is exactly 50 years since Gia-fu and I walked down 3rd Avenue in New York, taking our mock-up of *Tao Te Ching* to what would become our New York publisher. What a journey those fifty years have been!

After befriending numerous indigenous people over the past forty years, I have come to realize that Tao is also an indigenous tradition, one that draws on the wisdom of Earth and Sky. It is one that back when I was with Gia-fu fit perfectly into the world of this New England-born woman who had spent a lot of her childhood poking around in nature and who later used a camera to give herself permission to continue to do that as an adult and even now as an old woman in her 80th year.

I often wonder how it was that this then-somewhat-shy, woods-loving New England young woman came to play a part is something that has touched so many lives. Over a million copies of our *Tao Te Ching* have sold, and British, German, Portuguese, Russian, Greek, Finnish, and modern Taiwan Chinese editions have been published. I continue to receive heart-felt emails and letters from people who tell of how important our books have been in their lives. It is a privilege to have been a part of this, something so much larger than myself, something that will continue on after I no longer walk this Earth.

## Conclusion

*Tao Te Ching* has been my constant companion for fifty years, yet I still sometimes wonder if I really know anything about it. So I end with a snippet from *A Rainbow of Tao*—first a bit of my own writing, then a bit from *Tao Te Ching*.

Do I know anything about Tao?

How would I know if I know anything about Tao?

I laugh!

What impossible questions.

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The wise student hears of the Tao and practices it diligently.

The average student hears of the Tao and gives it thought now and again.

The foolish student hears of the Tao and laughs aloud.

If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is.

— *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 41

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**Jane English**, Ph.D. is best known for the edition of *Tao Te Ching* she created in 1972 with her late husband, Gia-fu Feng, and illustrated with his Chinese calligraphy and her black-and-white photographs of nature. She is a graduate of Mount Holohe College and received a doctorate in experimental sub-atomic particle physics from the University of Wisconsin in 1970. She currently lives in a small town in Vermont. Over the years she had created numerous books, calendars and divination tools.

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