



# **The Tao of Holding Space**

81 short chapters on  
facilitating Open Space

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2006

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*Tao Te Ching text from:*

*Tao Te Ching - Written by Lao-Tzu*

*A Translation*

*For the PUBLIC DOMAIN*

*by j.h.mcdonald*

1996

<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~stwright/rel/tao/TaoTeChing.html>

## Embodiment

1.

The tao that can be described  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be spoken  
is not the eternal Name.

The nameless is the boundary of Heaven and Earth.  
The named is the mother of creation.

Freed from desire, you can see the hidden mystery.  
By having desire, you can only see what is visibly  
real.

Yet mystery and reality  
emerge from the same source.  
This source is called darkness.

Darkness born from darkness.  
The beginning of all understanding.

Harrison Owen wrote that “holding space”  
is an act that is at once totally present and  
totally invisible. It is, like the Tao, an  
activity that is characterized by paradox.

Holding space is about resting in the trust  
that self-organization, that force which  
created the universe and brought us to this  
point, will continue to work its magic. To  
prepare yourself to submit to the power of  
self-organization, you must let go of  
outcomes. You must breathe life into the  
principle that “whatever happens is the  
only thing that could have happened.” We  
learn to let our desires fall away and  
confront what is present in the space, and  
what is real and living before us.

To hold space is to rest in the chaos that is  
darkness; a darkness that represents a vast  
field of unknown potential. It is this field  
that you are inviting to hum. From this  
field understanding will blossom, light will  
emerge, possibilities will grow.

## Opposites creating

2.

When people see things as beautiful,  
ugliness is created.  
When people see things as good,  
evil is created.

Being and non-being produce each other.  
Difficult and easy complement each other.  
Long and short define each other.  
High and low oppose each other.  
Fore and aft follow each other.

Therefore the Master  
can act without doing anything  
and teach without saying a word.  
Things come her way and she does not stop them;  
things leave and she lets them go.  
She has without possessing,  
and acts without any expectations.  
When her work is done, she takes no credit.  
That is why it will last forever.

Non-doing defines doing. Sitting in stillness invites people to move. Getting out of the way allows people to fill space with their passion. Letting go of expectations leaves room for responsibility to come forth. All of this is integrity. Every piece of doing requires the strong presence of non-doing to anchor it.

Stifling every impulse to intervene, to give directions and orders leaves space for others to design their lives. You can create a container and then stand by and watch it fill and teem with life. You don't resist the natural movements of groups of people co-creating their futures. Instead you work on your own inability to be still, to want to own the outcomes, to want to invest your ego.

This is not your show. You are holding space, embodying space and being empty and full at the same time. If they thank you in the closing circle, you have not done enough.

## No acclaim

3.

If you overly esteem talented individuals,  
people will become overly competitive.  
If you overvalue possessions,  
people will begin to steal.

Do not display your treasures  
or people will become envious.

The Master leads by  
emptying people's minds,  
filling their bellies,  
weakening their ambitions,  
and making them become strong.  
Preferring simplicity and freedom from desires,  
avoiding the pitfalls of knowledge and wrong action.

For those who practice not-doing,  
everything will fall into place.

We begin with people in a circle. There are  
no names, not titles, no ranks or  
descriptions. Just a circle of people, being a  
circle together.

They gaze at one another. Invited to sweep  
the circle with their eyes, note who is here  
and contemplate what they know and what  
they don't know.

It is not your job at this point to say that  
you have credentials. It is not your job to  
seek approval from them. You simply walk  
the circle, inviting eyes to connect, inviting  
hearts to meet in the empty space you are  
about to hold.

## Emptiness

4.

The Tao is like an empty container:  
it can never be emptied and can never be filled.  
Infinitely deep, it is the source of all things.  
It dulls the sharp, unties the knotted,  
shades the lighted, and unites all of creation with  
dust.

It is hidden but always present.  
I don't know who gave birth to it .  
It is older than the concept of God.

It is called "Open Space." The centre is  
empty except for a few tools. These tools  
are all that is needed to completely fill the  
space.

Blank sheets of paper are open to any  
possibility. Entirely new worlds can be  
created out of this emptiness. Great  
quantities of unknown energy can coalesce  
around the invitation to step into the full  
emptiness and give birth to the new.

You are holding this space. You have all of  
creation in your hands, like a delicate glass  
ball. You must simply allow it to rest there,  
and let the people draw on the echoes  
planted in their genes, and continue the  
journey of evolution together.

## Impartiality

5.

Heaven and Earth are impartial;  
they treat all of creation as straw dogs.  
The Master doesn't take sides;  
she treats everyone like a straw dog.

The space between Heaven and Earth is like a  
bellows;  
it is empty, yet has not lost its power.  
The more it is used, the more it produces;  
the more you talk of it, the less you comprehend.

It is better not to speak of things you do not  
understand.

What can you possibly say?

In a room of twenty people there are XX  
millions of possibilities. How can you  
evaluate them? As they engage in action,  
who can say that there is a better way?

We dance around the stunning vibrancy of  
energy filling the space. We cannot know  
what will happen, and as we watch it  
unfold, we cannot judge it's efficacy. The  
more energy that falls into the centre, the  
more energy the centre produces. Passion  
flooding into the middle inspires  
passionate engagement on the edges.

It is your job to marvel as it happens all  
around you. Someone must sit in non-  
judgment and hold forth the belief that all  
possibilities may exist.

6.

The spirit of emptiness is immortal.  
It is called the Great Mother  
because it gives birth to Heaven and Earth.

It is like a vapor,  
barely seen but always present.  
Use it effortlessly.

## **Spirit of emptiness**

The middle of the space is empty. It is itself, the space of invitation, a space of possibility, a space that gives rise to any potential, any direction, any result.

Open Space is a way of navigating everything and nothing. Holding space is the art of being completely present, and totally invisible.



## Long enduring

7.

The Tao of Heaven is eternal,  
and the earth is long enduring.  
Why are they long enduring?  
They do not live for themselves;  
thus they are present for all beings.

The Master puts herself last;  
And finds herself in the place of authority.  
She detaches herself from all things;  
Therefore she is united with all things.  
She gives no thought to self.  
She is perfectly fulfilled.

This is the pure practice of servant leadership. You have nothing to offer in terms of direction, only a container to hold and a will to manifest. You place yourself outside the circle, get out of the way when the marketplace opens and you find that the group manages itself.

You stay away to the side, observe with compassion but remain detached from the outcome. You trust the people, the process, the great truth unfolding, and find yourself folding in to the emergence which is springing out all around you.

## No competition

8.

The supreme good is like water,  
which benefits all of creation  
without trying to compete with it.  
It gathers in unpopular places.  
Thus it is like the Tao.

The location makes the dwelling good.  
Depth of understanding makes the mind good.  
A kind heart makes the giving good.  
Integrity makes the government good.  
Accomplishments makes your labors good.  
Proper timing makes a decision good.

Only when there is no competition  
will we all live in peace.

What we want is to facilitate the flow of collaboration. Your role is to care for the small intangibles, the space, the quality of the invitation, the integrity of the offering.

There may be conflicting ideas and contrasting statements. There may be heat between participants. But if there is truly an open space, then all of this can be accommodated. Opposites can meet on the same agenda, collaboration can be invited, transcendent ideas can come forward.

The open space is the place that frees participants from the need to beat each other. All they are left with then is the invitation to work.

## Walk away

9.

It is easier to carry an empty cup  
than one that is filled to the brim.

The sharper the knife  
the easier it is to dull.  
The more wealth you possess  
the harder it is to protect.  
Pride brings it's own trouble.

When you have accomplished your goal  
simply walk away.  
This is the path way to Heaven.

When the space has been opened, and the people are working, Harrison tells us to pick up coffee cups. We can care for the space at the same time as we are reminded that carrying emptiness is easier than trying to fit everything into the cup.

And when the event is over, walk away and let the people embrace each other, share their comments with one another, exchange smiles and astonishment. It is their work, and you have held space for it and that is all. All that is left to do is to walk away.

## Grow, not control

10.

Nurture the darkness of your soul  
until you become whole.  
Can you do this and not fail?  
Can you focus your life-breath until you become  
supple as a newborn child?  
While you cleanse your inner vision  
will you be found without fault?  
Can you love people and lead them  
without forcing your will on them?  
When Heaven gives and takes away  
can you be content with the outcome?  
When you understand all things  
can you step back from your own understanding?

Giving birth and nourishing,  
making without possessing,  
expecting nothing in return.  
To grow, yet not to control:  
This is the mysterious virtue.

You are being asked to do something that seems so counterintuitive that at first blush it also seems impossible. There is nothing to direct, no expertise to share, and no way you can take credit for what has happened. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.

To do this you need to be clear, to understand that whatever gets made is not yours, and however people feel is not a result of you. When you see the pattern emerge, you must simply let it emerge and let everyone else discover it too. After all, that is how you got started doing this.

You have tilled the ground in which the people have planted seeds. What has grown is theirs.

## Using emptiness

11.

Thirty spokes are joined together in a wheel,  
but it is the center hole  
that allows the wheel to function.

We mold clay into a pot,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that makes the vessel useful.

We fashion wood for a house,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that makes it livable.

We work with the substantial,  
but the emptiness is what we use.

Open Space works because of the space in the middle, the empty, open invitation to action. As you walk the circle to open space, sometimes you might want to walk in lines across the middle of the circle, to invite people to come forward out of their chairs, to transit the face of emptiness and begin filling their container with ideas.

But there is another emptiness to cultivate and that is the emptiness within you. Free of expectation, free of attachments to outcomes, you can be the best example to the participants of using emptiness to work with substance.

## Sensing invitation

12.

Five colors blind the eye.  
Five notes deafen the ear.  
Five flavors makes the palate go stale.  
Too much activity deranges the mind.  
Too much wealth causes crime.

The Master acts on what she feels  
and not what she sees.  
She shuns the latter,  
and prefers to seek the former.

No amount of slick presentation, pleasing to the eye, attractive to the ear, sensual to the touch, is going to bring the future to fruition. A tug only, at the heart, at our faculties to sense what wants to be born: that is what draws us together.

The act of holding space demands that you turn your eyes and ears inward and still yourself while the invitations unfold around you.

13.

Success is as dangerous as failure,  
and we are often our own worst enemy.

What does it mean  
that success is as dangerous as failure?  
He who is superior is also someone's subordinate.  
Receiving favor and losing it both cause alarm.  
That is what is meant  
by success is as dangerous as failure.

What does it mean  
that we are often our own worst enemy?  
The reason I have an enemy  
is because I have "self".  
If I no longer had a "self",  
I would no longer have an enemy.

Love the whole world as if it were your self;  
then you will truly care for all things.

## Let go of self

The key to holding space is letting go of  
your self and becoming unattached from  
the work. If you can't do this, then people  
will blame you for their failures and praise  
you for their successes. Neither condition  
is fair.

When you walk the circle, when you sit  
with the process, watch that your body  
language does not say "I am in charge."  
Align your actions with your statements,  
and your being with the invitation you  
have just issued.

14.

Look for it, and it can't be seen.  
Listen for it, and it can't be heard.  
Grasp for it, and it can't be caught.  
These three cannot be further described,  
so we treat them as The One.

It's highest is not bright.  
It's depths are not dark.  
Unending, unnameable, it returns to nothingness.  
Formless forms, and image less images,  
subtle, beyond all understanding.

Approach it and you will not see a beginning;  
follow it and there will be no end.  
When we grasp the Tao of the ancient ones,  
we can use it to direct our life today.  
To know the ancient origin of Tao:  
this is the beginning of wisdom.

## Using vapourware

Harrison Owen once called Open Space  
“vapourware.” There are a million people  
who want to describe it, but no one is ever  
satisfied with the explanation.

It arises from an empty circle and returns to  
an empty circle. To come into an Open  
Space meeting from the outside is to see a  
coffee break in progress. To sit in an Open  
Space meeting all day is to be taken on  
journeys of unfathomable depth.

How can you facilitate this?



15.

The Sages of old were profound  
and knew the ways of subtlety and discernment.  
Their wisdom is beyond our comprehension.  
Because their knowledge was so far superior  
I can only give a poor description.

They were careful  
as someone crossing an frozen stream in winter.  
Alert as if surrounded on all sides by the enemy.  
Courteous as a guest.  
Fluid as melting ice.  
Whole as an uncarved block of wood.  
Receptive as a valley.  
Turbid as muddied water.

Who can be still  
until their mud settles  
and the water is cleared by itself?  
Can you remain tranquil until right action occurs by  
itself?

The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.  
For only those who are not full are able to be used  
which brings the feeling of completeness.

## Flexible mind

The only way “Whatever happens is the  
only thing that could have happened” can  
be a principle that comes to life is if you  
approach each Open Space with a flexible  
mind. You come like a guest to a group of  
people, not knowing them, not seeking  
clarity.

By remaining true to the process and open  
to the outcome, you begin to embody  
clarity. By remaining calm, you invite  
action. By remaining empty you encourage  
fullness.

16.

If you can empty your mind of all thoughts  
your heart will embrace the tranquility of peace.  
Watch the workings of all of creation,  
but contemplate their return to the source.

All creatures in the universe  
return to the point where they began.  
Returning to the source is tranquility  
because we submit to Heavens mandate.

Returning to Heavens  
mandate is called being constant.  
Knowing the constant is called 'enlightenment'.  
Not knowing the constant  
is the source of evil deeds  
because we have no roots.  
By knowing the constant  
we can accept things as they are.  
By accepting things as they are,  
we become impartial.  
By being impartial, we become one with Heaven.  
By being one with Heaven,  
we become one with Tao.  
Being one with Tao,  
we are no longer concerned about  
loosing our life because we know the Tao is constant  
and we are one with Tao.

## **Prepare yourself**

You cannot hold space if you are already  
full. Holding space requires all of your  
capacity, offered fully and with certainty.  
Your concerns don't matter to the group, so  
your preparation is directed at shedding  
them.

Holding space is about being the  
fundamental character the group is seeking.  
If it's clarity, be clear, if it's peace, be peace.  
Are you clear now? Are you peace in this  
moment?

17.

The best leaders are those  
the people hardly know exist.  
The next best is a leader who is loved and praised.  
Next comes the one who is feared.  
The worst one is the leader that is despised.

If you don't trust the people,  
they will become untrustworthy.

The best leaders value their words,  
and use them sparingly.  
When she has accomplished her task,  
the people say, "Amazing:  
we did it, all by ourselves!"

## **We did it**

Holding space demands that you be the  
best kind of leader, without compromise.  
Trust the group, be totally present and  
completely invisible.

If the people did not do it themselves, it is  
not Open Space.

18.

When the great Tao is abandoned,  
charity and righteousness appear.  
When intellectualism arises,  
hypocrisy is close behind.

When there is strife in the family unit,  
people talk about 'brotherly love'.

When the country falls into chaos,  
politicians talk about 'patriotism'.

## **Wayfinding**

It is the stories and constructions that we  
create to maintain our power that obscures  
us from seeing our true nature.

Whatever these stories are, it is up to you to  
invite an opening through. Power founded  
on contrivance is useless for making  
positive change.

19.

Forget about knowledge and wisdom,  
and people will be a hundred times better off.  
Throw away charity and righteousness,  
and people will return to brotherly love.  
Throw away profit and greed,  
and there won't be any thieves.

These three are superficial and aren't enough  
to keep us at the center of the circle, so we must  
also:

Embrace simplicity.  
Put others first.  
Desire little.

## **Simplicity**

Open Space is a simple yet elegant thing.  
Don't burden it with wit and savvy and  
expertise. Simply walk to the centre of the  
circle, explain the process and get out of the  
way.

This is opening space.

20.

Renounce knowledge and your problems will end.  
What is the difference between yes and no?  
What is the difference between good and evil?  
Must you fear what others fear?  
Nonsense, look how far you have missed the mark!

Other people are joyous,  
as though they were at a spring festival.  
I alone am unconcerned and expressionless,  
like an infant before it has learned to smile.

Other people have more than they need;  
I alone seem to possess nothing.  
I am lost and drift about with no place to go.  
I am like a fool, my mind is in chaos.

Ordinary people are bright;  
I alone am dark.  
Ordinary people are clever;  
I alone am dull.  
Ordinary people seem discriminating;  
I alone am muddled and confused.  
I drift on the waves on the ocean,  
blown at the mercy of the wind.  
Other people have their goals,  
I alone am dull and uncouth.

I am different from ordinary people.  
I nurse from the Great Mother's breasts.

## **Be yourself**

You stand in relation to nothing. Model  
enthusiasm, revel in the joy of empty space  
and full potential.

But don't model enthusiasm because  
people are timid, don't revel in joy because  
people are frightened. Don't try to create  
conditions that aren't there.

You know what could happen here.  
Welcome it. Embrace it with everything  
you are. You have been nourished by life.  
Standing in the middle of the circle, in utter  
silence, is the time to live.

21.

The greatest virtue you can have  
comes from following only the Tao;  
which takes a form that is intangible and evasive.

Even though the Tao is intangible and evasive,  
we are able to know it exists.  
Intangible and evasive, yet it has a manifestation.  
Secluded and dark, yet there is a vitality within it.  
It's vitality is very genuine.  
Within it we can find order.

Since the beginning of time, the Tao has always  
existed.  
It is beyond existing and not existing .  
How do I know where creation comes from?  
I look inside myself and see it.

## Care of life

Open Space is not a tool to be modified and  
changed to suit your whims. It is born out  
of the fundamental processes of life: self-  
organization, a desire to improve, a will to  
evolve.

It is not the process that needs  
modification; it is ourselves. When you feel  
the need to change it, look within you, find  
that impulse and change that instead. Then  
you keep the space as open as yourself.

22.

If you want to become whole,  
first let yourself become broken.  
If you want to become straight,  
first let yourself become twisted.  
If you want to become full,  
first let yourself become empty.  
If you want to become new,  
first let yourself become old.  
Those whose desires are few gets them,  
those whose desires are great go astray.

For this reason the Master embraces the Tao,  
as an example for the world to follow.  
Because she isn't self centered,  
people can see the light in her.  
Because she does not boast of herself,  
she becomes a shining example.  
Because she does not glorify herself,  
she becomes a person of merit.  
Because she wants nothing from the world,  
the world can not overcome her.

When the ancient Masters said,  
"If you want to become whole,  
then first let yourself be broken,"  
they weren't using empty words.  
All who do this will be made complete.

## Way of life

The four principles:

- *Whoever comes are the right people*
- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened*
- *When it starts is the right time.*
- *When it's over, it's over*

The Law of Two Feet:

*If you find yourself in a place where  
you are not learning or contributing,  
move somewhere where you can.*

These are not just clever statements. They are guides for living a life in open space., lowering oneself, bending and disappearing into wholeness and life.



23.

Nature uses few words:  
when the gale blows, it will not last long;  
when it rains hard, it lasts but a little while;  
What causes these to happen? Heaven and Earth.

Why do we humans go on endlessly about little  
when nature does much in a little time?  
If you open yourself to the Tao,  
you and Tao become one.  
If you open yourself to Virtue,  
then you can become virtuous.  
If you open yourself to loss,  
then you will become lost.

If you open yourself to the Tao,  
the Tao will eagerly welcome you.  
If you open yourself to virtue,  
virtue will become a part of you.  
If you open yourself to loss,  
the lost are glad to see you.

"When you do not trust people,  
people will become untrustworthy."

## **Model enthusiasm**

Once you truly understand Open Space ,  
once you have embraced it and worked  
with it and invited it to meld with your life,  
then you can embody it.

You meet the stares of cynical disbelief and  
the skeptical murmurs and model your  
own enthusiasm for what is transpiring,  
using few words and simple questions.

What do you really want to do? Why don't  
you take care of it?

Let's trust one another to meet our own  
needs that way.

24.

Those who stand on tiptoes  
do not stand firmly.  
Those who rush ahead  
don't get very far.  
Those who try to out shine others  
dim their own light.  
Those who call themselves righteous  
can't know how wrong they are.  
Those who boast of their accomplishments  
diminishes the things they have done.

Compared to the Tao, these actions are unworthy.  
If we are to follow the Tao,  
we must not do these things.

## **Right time**

In the glorious enfolded Now, we have  
everything we need. We can choose to  
explode it everywhere at once, or to tease  
out the threads and follow their unraveling.

But we can't draw sustenance from  
expecting great things in short measure,  
nor can we say that what we are doing has  
great merit. When it starts is the right time,  
when it's over it's over. These things say  
nothing about scale, rightness or great  
things. The skill we need is to keep focused  
on the Now, which contains everything.

25.

Before the universe was born  
there was something in the chaos of the heavens.  
It stands alone and empty,  
solitary and unchanging.  
It is ever present and secure.  
It may be regarded as the Mother of the universe.  
Because I do not know its name,  
I call it the Tao.  
If forced to give it a name,  
I would call it 'Great'.

Because it is Great means it is everywhere.  
Being everywhere means it is eternal.  
Being eternal means everything returns to it.

Tao is great.  
Heaven is great.  
Earth is great.  
Humanity is great.  
Within the universe, these are the four great things.

Humanity follows the earth.  
Earth follows Heaven.  
Heaven follows the Tao.  
The Tao follows only itself.

## Chaos as natural law

Nothing truly new is born from encrusted forms. At play in the spaces we create are all the forces of Creation; the balled-up energy, the fantastic potential of a universe unfolding from the chaos of beginning.

When people are nervous, or aimlessly perusing the marketplace, this is when you can be most vigilant. Watch for that spark, the spark of creation that, in a moment, tips the chaos towards order, begins the journey towards the point embodied in the invitation. We follow the natural laws to the letter. We need only acknowledge them

26.

Heaviness is the basis of lightness.  
Stillness is the standard of activity.

Thus the Master travels all day  
without ever leaving her wagon.  
Even though she has much to see,  
is she at peace in her indifference.

Why should the lord of a thousand chariots  
be amused at the foolishness of the world?  
If you abandon yourself to foolishness,  
you lose touch with your beginnings.  
If you let yourself become distracted,  
you will lose the basis of your power.

## **Stay focused**

Your job is not to do the work of the group.  
Your job is not to involve yourself in the  
small distractions of the day. Your job is  
not to feel anxious for all the people who  
are struggling with their learning.

Stay focused on your job: holding space.  
Remain at peace in the chaos, remain  
detached in the emerging swirl of  
attachment. People will be shedding  
stories and assumptions all around you.  
Avoid catching them.

27.

A good traveler leaves no tracks,  
and a skillful speaker is well rehearsed.  
A good bookkeeper has an excellent memory,  
and a well made door  
is easy to open and needs no locks.  
A good knot needs no rope and it can not come  
undone.

Thus the Master is willing to help everyone,  
and doesn't know the meaning of rejection.  
She is there to help all of creation,  
and doesn't abandon even the smallest creature.  
This is called embracing the light.

What is a good person but a bad person's teacher?  
What is a bad person  
but raw material for his teacher?  
If you fail to honor your teacher  
or fail to enjoy your student,  
you will become deluded  
no matter how smart you are.  
It is the secret of prime importance.

## Helping creation

How can you help everyone and serve no one? Everyone in your group is uniquely capable of caring for their needs. Holding space means attending to the container in which all of this creation is occurring.

All day, you are confronted with opportunities to learn about yourself, as you patch the holes and strengthen the walls of the container. You serve creation when you hold a space for it to work. You serve all the people when you fall away from their journeys and let them create their own footprints.

28.

Know the masculine,  
but keep to the feminine:  
and become a watershed to the world.  
If you embrace the world,  
the Tao will never leave you  
and you become as a little child.

Know the white,  
yet keep to the black:  
be a model for the world.  
If you are a model for the world,  
the Tao inside you will strengthen  
and you will return whole to your eternal beginning.

Know the honorable,  
but do not shun the disgraced:  
embracing the world as it is.  
If you embrace the world with compassion,  
then your virtue will return you to the uncarved  
block.

The block of wood is carved into utensils  
by carving void into the wood.  
The Master uses the utensils, yet prefers to keep to  
the block  
because of its limitless possibilities.  
Great works do not involve discarding substance.

## Balance

Chaos and order swirl around you and  
within you. You find that spot where they  
fall from you equally, neither one tipping  
you from your balance.

You need to hold out both the positive  
space of what is happening and the  
negative space of what is not happening. In  
the act of making something, people do not  
so much assemble things, as remove space  
from between the parts of the whole.  
Suddenly the light shines through and  
things glow.

That space is yours to hold and offer to the  
group so they may use it to fill out the  
intricate patterns of their creation.

29.

Do you want to rule the world and control it?  
I don't think it can ever be done.

The world is sacred vessel  
and it can not be controlled.  
You will only make it worse if you try.  
It may slip through your fingers and disappear.

Some are meant to lead,  
and others are meant to follow;  
Some must always strain,  
and others have an easy time;  
Some are naturally big and strong,  
and others will always be small;  
Some will be protected and nurtured,  
and others will meet with destruction.

The Master accepts things as they are,  
and out of compassion avoids extravagance,  
excess and the extremes.

## Let go of control

This is the hardest part. Until you have held space, you have no idea the extent to which the impulse to control things is alive in you. It shows up in Open Space in the subtlest ways: wanting to order to the wall, wanting to turn up the heat, wanting to move chairs into circles.

So hear this deeply: you are not in control. Everything you do for the group is one less thing they know they can do for themselves. Your role is to hold this big space, full of compassion and acceptance that whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.

Your body and soul will ache at times. Your volition to move in will become overpowering. Simply notice this impulse. Gift it to yourself and spare the group from your own private tortures.

30.

Those who lead people by following the Tao  
don't use weapons to enforce their will.  
Using force always leads to unseen troubles.

In the places where armies march,  
thorns and briars bloom and grow.  
After armies take to war,  
bad years must always follow.  
The skillful commander  
strikes a decisive blow then stops.  
When victory is won over the enemy through war  
it is not a thing of great pride.  
When the battle is over,  
arrogance is the new enemy.  
War can result when no other alternative is given,  
so the one who overcomes an enemy should not  
dominate them.  
The strong always weakened with time.

This is not the way of the Tao.  
That which is not of the Tao will soon end.

## Space invaders

It seems like there is always someone who knows more than anyone else. They will appear from time to time with demands, big and small. Sometimes it is a simple question, occasionally it is an outright rejection of what is happening. In all forms, subtle and helpful as well as bold and destructive, these people are fighting to hold on to themselves. It is a hard thing to watch, worse still if you are the target of their grasping.

With practice you can see them and with practice you can embrace a space big enough for them to dwell. If you close the space to accommodate their fears, you prevent the group from helping them to grow, and you deny the group the possibility of its learning how to accommodate them.

So inwardly, bite your tongue. Thank them and move on.



31.

Weapons are the bearers of bad news;  
all people should detest them.

The wise man values the left side,  
and in time of war he values the right.  
Weapons are meant for destruction,  
and thus are avoided by the wise.  
Only as a last resort  
will a wise person use a deadly weapon.  
If peace is her true objective  
how can she rejoice in the victory of war?  
Those who rejoice in victory  
delight in the slaughter of humanity.  
Those who resort to violence  
will never bring peace to the world.  
The left side is a place of honor on happy occasions.  
The right side is reserved for mourning at a funeral.  
When the lieutenants  
take the left side to prepare for war,  
the general should be on the right side,  
because he knows the outcome will be death.  
The death of many  
should be greeted with great sorrow,  
and the victory celebration should honor those who  
have died.

## Cultivate peace

The way we are with one another is the  
way we want to be. Groups are full of the  
violence of dying, the railing and fighting  
against the decay of old order and control.  
You are complicit in this if you take the side  
of those who espouse violent tactics to  
move their agenda forward.

So you stay on the other side, hold space  
for the possibility that there is another way  
to be in the world, that the death and war  
around you does not want to thrive.

Open Space is a place where even the  
staunchest soldiers can confront the sorrow  
and loss of the wars they champion. It is a  
place that opens a new reflective moment.  
You are the germ of that idea.

32.

The Tao is nameless and unchanging.  
Although it appears insignificant,  
nothing in the world can contain it.

If a ruler abides by its principles,  
then her people will willingly follow.  
Heaven would then reign on earth,  
like sweet rain falling on paradise.  
People would have no need for laws,  
because the law would be written on their hearts.

Naming is a necessity for order,  
but naming can not order all things.  
Naming often makes things impersonal,  
so we should know when naming should end.  
Knowing when to stop naming,  
you can avoid the pitfall it brings.

All things end in the Tao  
just as the small streams and the largest rivers  
flow through valleys to the sea.

## **Keep it short**

The Creator sang the universe into creation,  
and named everything.

So all you have to do is state the principles  
and the law. It is not up to you to force  
those on people, but simply to name this  
space as one that is bounded by a few  
simple, universal rules. Groups don't need  
theory, they don't even need to know the  
name of the process. It's better not to tell  
them what Open Space is.

Simply name the principles and the law,  
open space, and everything will take care of  
itself. The order we get for free contains  
everything the group needs. You have  
nothing to add.

33.

Those who know others are intelligent;  
those who know themselves are truly wise.  
Those who master others are strong;  
those who master themselves have true power.

Those who know they have enough are truly  
wealthy.

Those who persist will reach their goal.

Those who keep their course have a strong will.  
Those who embrace death will not perish,  
but have life everlasting.

## **Turn inward**

You can only truly hold space when you know what you are made of. At times, this job takes tremendous effort, but it is effort directed inward, at the embers that smolder in you, that raise the heat in your body and send your mind into spasms.

Those are the things over which you have control. It is better to sit in the corner and extinguish those fires than to think you can put out the blazes of passion in the group.

34.

The great Tao flows unobstructed in every direction.  
All things rely on it to conceive and be born,  
and it does not deny even the smallest of creation.  
When it has accomplished great wonders,  
it does not claim them for itself.  
It nourishes infinite worlds,  
yet it doesn't seek to master the smallest creature.  
Since it is without wants and desires,  
it can be considered humble.  
All of creation seeks it for refuge  
yet it does not seek to master or control.  
Because it does not seek greatness;  
it is able to accomplish truly great things.

## **Open Space is not magic**

You have opened a space and the group is at work within it. But you haven't opened a space - the sponsor has. And the sponsor hasn't opened a space - the space has always been there.

What you are seeing can happen anytime. It is something anyone can have. It is right there, bounding every act of creation, every inspiration and every idea.

It is not yours and nothing that happens within it belongs to it. The magic is not Open Space. The magic is the loosening of chains and the dissolving into what is.

35.

She who follows the way of the Tao  
will draw the world to her steps.  
She can go without fear of being injured,  
because she has found peace and tranquility in her  
heart.

Where there is music and good food,  
people will stop to enjoy it.  
But words spoken of the Tao  
seem to them boring and stale.  
When looked at, there is nothing for them to see.  
When listen for, there is nothing for them to hear.  
Yet if they put it to use, it would never be  
exhausted.

## **Why are we paying you?**

Sometimes, people will come to you and  
ask why you are being paid.

Simply smile and respond  
compassionately.

“When people are able to take  
responsibility for their own passion,  
management gets really easy.”

36.

If you want something to return to the source,  
you must first allow it to spread out.  
If you want something to weaken,  
you must first allow it to become strong.  
If you want something to be removed,  
you must first allow it to flourish.  
If you want to possess something,  
you must first give it away.

This is called the subtle understanding  
of how things are meant to be.

The soft and pliable overcomes the hard and  
inflexible.

Just as fish remain hidden in deep waters,  
it is best to keep weapons out of sight.

## Counterintuition

Don't look for answers in the directions  
that people want to go. The furthest goal  
lies on the other side of the invitation.

Invite people to action, but hold space for  
rest. Invite people to peace, but hold space  
for conflict. Invite growth, but hold space  
for germination. Invite fullness but hold  
space for generosity.

Being counterintuitive is the gift you give  
to the group. It opens space when their  
momentum seeks to close.

37.

The Tao never acts with force,  
yet there is nothing that it can not do.

If rulers could follow the way of the Tao,  
then all of creation  
would willingly follow their example.  
If selfish desires  
were to arise after their transformation,  
I would erase them  
with the power of the Uncarved Block.

By the power of the Uncarved Block,  
future generations would loose their selfish desires.  
By loosing their selfish desires,  
the world would naturally settle into peace.

## **It's all yours**

There is a moment right after you have introduced the process and you are opening up the space for topics to be posted. In this moment, you must step out of the space and give it all over to the group. The space is empty of form, simply the imprint of your energy on the circle, markers and paper in the middle awaiting the creative energy of the group.

“It's all yours.” The group becomes the sculptor and the space becomes the uncarved block.

38.

The highest good is not to seek to do good,  
but to allow yourself to become it.  
The ordinary person seeks to do good things,  
and finds that they can not do them continually.

The Master does not force virtue on others,  
thus she is able to accomplish her task.  
The ordinary person who uses force,  
will find that they accomplish nothing.

The kind person acts from the heart,  
and accomplishes a multitude of things.  
The righteous person acts out of pity,  
yet leaves many things undone.  
The moral person will act out of duty,  
and when no one will respond  
will roll up his sleeves and uses force.

When the Tao is forgotten, there is righteousness.  
When righteousness is forgotten, there is morality.  
When morality is forgotten, there is the law.  
The law is the husk of faith,  
and trust is the beginning of chaos.

Our basic understandings are not from the Tao  
because they come from the depths of our  
misunderstanding.  
The master abides in the fruit and not in the husk.  
She dwells in the Tao,  
and not with the things that hide it.  
This is how she increases in wisdom.

## Being open space

Holding space means becoming singularly  
indistinct from the laws and the principles  
you have just talked about. You are  
embodying everything that lies at the heart  
of the process. Open Space is not a set of  
prescriptions, it is a way of being. It is a  
way of people working and living together,  
without force, without effort, without duty.

To hold a space for passion and  
responsibility to work, you get inside  
everything that is enfolding around you  
and you stay there, inside the contrivances,  
inside the image, inside the trappings.

The essence of Open Space is in the stillness  
and emptiness at the centre. Be in that  
space while everything swirls around you.



39.

The masters of old attained unity with the Tao.  
Heaven attained unity and become pure.  
The earth attained unity and found peace.  
The spirits attained unity so they could minister.  
The valleys attained unity that they might be full.  
Humanity attained unity that they might flourish.  
Their leaders attained unity that they might set the example.  
This is the power of unity.

Without unity, the sky becomes filthy.  
Without unity, the earth becomes unstable.  
Without unity, the spirits become unresponsive and disappear.  
Without unity, the valleys become dry as a desert.  
Without unity, human kind can't reproduce and becomes extinct.  
Without unity, our leaders become corrupt and fall.

The great view the small as their source,  
and the high takes the low as their foundation.  
Their greatest asset becomes their humility.  
They speak of themselves as orphans and widows,  
thus they truly seek humility.  
Do not shine like the precious gem,  
but be as dull as a common stone.

## Attaining unity

To facilitate open space you must facilitate nothing. To hold space you hold nothing.  
To make something from these efforts you must create nothing.

Attaining unity means to bring spirit and matter together. Bring passion and responsibility together. Bring time and space together. Bring presence and absence together.

You are totally present and completely invisible.

40.

All movement returns to the Tao.  
Weakness is how the Tao works.

All of creation is born from substance.  
Substance is born of nothing-ness.

## **The source**

Arrive early and leave late. Then you will see that an empty room lies on either end of Open Space. You can feel it fill with life and ebb again. Beginning in silence, ending in silence, transformation in the middle.

41.

When a superior person hears of the Tao,  
She diligently puts it into practice.  
When an average person hears of the Tao,  
he believes half of it, and doubts the other half.  
When a foolish person hears of the Tao,  
he laughs out loud at the very idea.  
If he didn't laugh,  
it wouldn't be the Tao.

Thus it is said:

The brightness of the Tao seems like darkness,  
the advancement of the Tao seems like retreat,  
the level path seems rough,  
the superior path seem empty,  
the pure seems to be tarnished,  
and true virtue doesn't seem to be enough.  
The virtue of caution seems like cowardice,  
the pure seems to be polluted,  
the true square seems to have no corners,  
the best vessels take the most time to finish,  
the greatest sounds cannot be heard,  
and the greatest image has no form.

The Tao hides in the unnamed,  
Yet it alone nourishes and completes all things.

## **Hiding in the unnamed**

When you feel the need to do more, find a way to do less. When you think there is something else to say, look for another way to be silent. When you grasp at outcomes and desire results, open your hand and hold more.

In Open Space, action arises from stillness.  
The answers are contained in the question.  
The essence is hiding and you are inviting it into the room.

42.

The Tao gave birth to One.  
The One gave birth to Two.  
The Two gave birth to Three.  
The Three gave birth to all of creation.

All things carry Yin  
yet embrace Yang.  
They blend their life breaths  
in order to produce harmony.

People despise being orphaned, widowed and poor.  
But the noble ones take these as their titles.  
In losing, much is gained,  
and in gaining, much is lost.

What others teach I too will teach:  
"The strong and violent will not die a natural death."

## The marketplace

The chaos of the marketplace loosens up connections, expectations and intentions. Serendipity, proximity and synchronicity take over and order arises.

There is no way to work with these dynamics. We must instead step away and allow people to find their place, allow topics to attract the right people, allow whatever happens to happen.

The group gains from this because synergies occur where passions overlap and meet and envelop one another and friends and collaborators are quickly found. There is no forcing together of the pieces that requires continued force to stay together. People are instead bound by the magnetic forces of invitation, call and response.

43.

That which offers no resistance,  
overcomes the hardest substances.  
That which offers no resistance  
can enter where there is no space.

Few in the world can comprehend  
the teaching without words,  
or understand the value of non-action.

## **Handling space invaders**

Most people don't want to be space  
invaders, but by their actions they close  
space just the same. When someone seems  
to want to run things, and steps to the  
middle to try to gain something from the  
circle, just go and stand beside that person.  
Remain silent, and remain close.

The person will soon feel what it is like to  
have space close. Things will then usually  
move on.

44.

Which is more important, your honor or your life?  
Which is more valuable, your possessions or your person?

Which is more destructive, success or failure?

Because of this, great love extracts a great cost  
and true wealth requires greater loss.

Knowing when you have enough avoids dishonor,  
and knowing when to stop will keep you from  
danger  
and bring you a long, happy life.

## **Doing just enough**

To open space requires only a few minutes  
of introduction and instruction. Whether  
you do this well or badly hardly seems to  
matter. The success or failure of the group  
is entirely up to them.

The group does not need you to invest in  
them, to teach them or to guide them. They  
don't need your presence at all.

Simply open space and sit with them.

45.

The greatest accomplishments seem imperfect,  
yet their usefulness is not diminished.  
The greatest fullness seems empty,  
yet it will be inexhaustible.

The greatest straightness seems crooked.  
The most valued skill seems like clumsiness.  
The greatest speech seems full of stammers.

Movement overcomes the cold,  
and stillness overcomes the heat.  
That which is pure and still is the universal ideal.

## **Not what you expect**

Start with no agenda and one will emerge.  
Begin with nothing and great depths will  
flood in. Whatever happens is the only  
thing that could have happened, and yet  
that crooked and twisty path leads us to the  
moment of action.

At the end of a day a half, savour the  
moment between the close of the space and  
the opening of the new world.

46.

When the world follows the Tao,  
horses run free to fertilize the fields.  
When the world does not follow the Tao,  
war horses are bred outside the cities.

There is no greater transgression  
than condoning peoples selfish desires,  
no greater disaster than being discontent,  
and no greater retribution than for greed.

Whoever knows contentment will be at peace  
forever.

## **No control**

We are conditioned to believing that  
controlling things gets us results. When we  
bend to the temptation to control, we create  
an awful lot of hard work for ourselves.  
We have to become responsible for  
animating that which is within, and staying  
off the attacks from outside.

The first time someone comes to Open  
Space it seems that the choice is between  
control and chaos. In reality it is the choice  
between misery and contentment.



47.

Without opening your door,  
you can know the whole world.  
Without looking out your window,  
you can understand the way of the Tao.

The more knowledge you seek,  
the less you will understand.

The Master understands without leaving,  
sees clearly without looking,  
accomplishes much without doing anything.

## **It's all in the room**

When you open the space acknowledge  
that everything we might become is here in  
the room. All the potential for change, the  
capacity to do it well, the future that wants  
to be born – it's all in the room.

We sometimes think that we need to gather  
knowledge from environmental scans,  
surveys, focus groups. It's as if the answers  
lie outside of ourselves somewhere.

There is stuff to learn out there, but the best  
questions and the right answers are right  
here, right now.

48.

One who seeks knowledge  
learns something new every day.  
One who seeks the Tao  
unlearns something new every day.  
Less and less remains until you arrive at non-action.  
When you arrive at non-action,  
nothing will be left undone.

Mastery of the world is achieved  
by letting things take their natural course.  
You can not master the world by changing the  
natural way.

## **One less thing**

Cultivating a practice of opening space  
means constantly finding things not to do.  
For most facilitators, facilitating open space  
runs counter to everything that we know.

But if we practice finding those things we  
cling to and let go of them, gradually we  
will develop a practice of opening space  
that welcomes the group fully into it's  
work. And you will find that many other  
things change too.

49.

The Master has no mind of her own.  
She understands the mind of the people.

To those who are good she treats as good.  
To those who aren't good she also treats as good.  
This is how she attains true goodness.

She trusts people who are trustworthy.  
She also trusts people who aren't trustworthy.  
This is how she gains true trust.

The Master's mind is shut off from the world.  
Only for the sake of the people does she muddle her  
mind.  
They look to her in anticipation.  
Yet she treats them all as her children.

## **Meet each as they are**

Whoever comes are the right people means  
we meet the people in Open Space in all of  
the possibility of their true potential. And  
beyond this, we don't even bring that  
judgment to work.

Meet people as they are and let them be  
what they will be and flow will show up in  
Open Space. You have nothing to do with  
their work but to hold the container for it  
all to unfold.

Those who leave the womb at birth  
and those who enter their source at death,  
of these; three out of ten celebrate life,  
three out of ten celebrate death,  
and three out of ten simply go from life to death.  
What is the reason for this?  
Because they are afraid of dying,  
therefore they can not live.

I have heard that those who celebrate life  
walk safely among the wild animals.  
When they go into battle, they remain unharmed.  
The animals find no place to attack them  
and the weapons are unable to harm them.  
Why? Because they can find no place for death in  
them.

## **Serving life**

When you enter the circle to bring life to  
the group, your greatest task is to embody  
the life you are inviting. If you are inviting  
fierceness in the face of confusion and grief,  
you must stand fiercely against confusion  
and grief. If you are not afraid of Open  
Space then others will not be afraid of Open  
Space.

Our shadows play in this arena. Our fear  
of death stops us from welcoming life. Our  
normal complacency prevents us from  
attending to this work mindfully.

But the fundamental motion is to walk into  
that space with the strong knowledge that  
all that happens in there serves life.

51.

The Tao gives birth to all of creation.  
The virtue of Tao in nature nurtures them,  
and their family give them their form.  
Their environment then shapes them into  
completion.  
That is why every creature honors the Tao and its  
virtue.

No one tells them to honor the Tao and its virtue,  
it happens all by itself.  
So the Tao gives them birth,  
and its virtue cultivates them,  
cares for them,  
nurtures them,  
gives them a place of refuge and peace,  
helps them to grow and shelters them.

It gives them life without wanting to possess them,  
and cares for them expecting nothing in return.  
It is their master, but it does not seek to dominate  
them.  
This is called the dark and mysterious virtue.

## Emergent structure

People fret that structure leads to action.  
That is true, but it is not the structure from  
outside that leads to actions, it is the  
structure that emerges from inside that is  
where the explosion of action originates.  
Like a seed that contains the tree.

Open Space, empty and receiving, is the  
ground in which structure organizes the  
support and growth of action from ideas.  
From that empty place, small invitations  
emerge. From the small invitations,  
conversation nurtures growth. From that  
growth comes the momentum that attracts  
the resources of time and attention and  
money to see the ideas to completion.

The emptier the space the more giving it is  
and the more intricate the action that  
emerges. There is no need to talk about it,  
because that only confuses things. Just  
offer it and hold it open.

52.

The world had a beginning  
which we call the Great Mother.  
Once we have found the Mother,  
we begin to know what Her children should be.

When we know we are the Mothers child,  
we begin to guard the qualities of the Mother in us.  
She will protect us from all danger  
even if we lose our life.

Keep your mouth closed  
and embrace a simple life,  
and you will live care-free until the end of your  
days.

If you try to talk your way into a better life  
there will be no end to your trouble.

To understand the small is called clarity.  
Knowing how to yield is called strength.  
To use your inner light for understanding  
regardless of the danger  
is called depending on the Constant.

## Self-organization

Self-organization happens in Open Space  
because self-organization happens  
everywhere else. It is the story of  
everything that has occurred to this  
moment and will occur in the next one. As  
Brian Swimme once said, the miracle of the  
universe is that you start with a cloud of  
hydrogen, wait 15 billion years and  
suddenly – opera!

We are indeed children of this dynamic.  
We owe our very existence to self-  
organization. And if self-organization can  
produce something as gloriously beautiful  
as a human baby, it should do fine for  
anything we use it for.

It is not complicated, but it is simplicity  
that welcomes and holds complexity. It is  
not strong but it is yielding that allows  
strength to grow.

It creates whole universes by doing nothing  
at all.

53.

## Diversity

If I understood only one thing,  
I would want to use it to follow the Tao.  
My only fear would be one of pride.  
The Tao goes in the level places,  
but people prefer to take the short cuts.

If too much time is spent cleaning the house  
the land will become neglected  
and full of weeds,  
and the granaries will soon become empty  
because there is no one out working the fields.

To wear fancy clothes and ornaments,  
to have your fill of food and drink  
and to waste all of your money buying possessions  
is called the crime of excess.

Oh, how these things go against the way of the Tao!

One of the conditions under which Open Space works best is where there are high levels of diversity. People want easy answers and a clear path to a goal. But where there are a diversity of questions, there arises a multiplicity of answers and a variety of paths. And when these emerge, each can join the path that takes them in the easiest way to the places we all need to go.

To invest in one set of solutions, to assume that there is one path when complexity and diversity has created the conditions for our current situation, is to neglect the truth in favour of the preferences of ego and pride. This only serves ego and pride and not the deep questions that we are able to ask of one another.

In convergence, hold space for possibility and don't join the allure of the glamorous solution. Wise action invites all to join where they can.

54.

That which is well built  
will never be torn down.  
That which is well latched  
can not slip away.  
Those who do things well  
will be honored from generation to generation.

If this idea is cultivated in the individual,  
then his virtue will become genuine.  
If this idea is cultivated in your family,  
then virtue in your family will be great.  
If this idea is cultivated in your community,  
then virtue will go a long way.  
If this idea is cultivated in your country,  
then virtue will be in many places.  
If this idea is cultivated in the world,  
then virtue will be with everyone.

Then observe the person for what the person does,  
and observe the family for what it does,  
and observe the community for what it does,  
and observe the country for what it does,  
and observe the world for what it does.  
How do I know this saying is true?  
I observe these things and see.

## Practicing well

Space can be closed, but space holding  
cannot collapse. Invitations may come and  
go, but invitation is always present.  
Practicing the way of invitation and  
holding means that whether you are in  
Open Space or not, you will always be  
holding space, and the results may flow in  
yourself, your family, your community,  
your nation and your world.

Practice well so that the practice survives,  
even as projects come and go, spaces open  
and close, bodies arise and die.



55.

One who is filled with the Tao  
is like a newborn child.  
The infant is protected from  
the stinging insects, wild beasts, and birds of prey.  
Its bones are soft, its muscles are weak,  
but its grip is firm and strong.  
It doesn't know about the union  
of male and female,  
yet his penis can stand erect,  
because of the power of life within him.  
It can cry all day and never become hoarse.  
This is perfect harmony.

To understand harmony is to understand the  
Constant.  
To know the Constant is to be called 'enlightened'.  
To unnaturally try to extend life is not appropriate.  
To try and alter the life-breath is unnatural.  
The master understands that when something  
reaches its prime  
it will soon begin to decline.  
Changing the natural is against the way of the Tao.  
Those who do it will come to an early end.

## **Whatever happens is full of life**

Unless you approach each Open Space with  
new eyes, you will never see the life that is  
there. Everyone thinks they know what  
will happen and so that is what they look  
for. You alone know that whatever  
happens is the only thing that could have,  
and that which happens is full of the new  
life that arises from emergence.

So hold this stance, so that others may learn  
to join you in it to appreciate that as the  
event itself opens and closes, ideas and  
actions too arise and pass away, leaving in  
their wake a trail of life and change.  
Embody from the first moment that  
whatever happens is full of life.

56.

Those who know do not talk.  
Those who talk do not know.

Stop talking,  
meditate in silence,  
blunt your sharpness,  
release your worries,  
harmonize your inner light,  
and become one with the dust.  
Doing this is the called the dark and mysterious  
identity.

Those who have achieved the mysterious identity  
can not be approached, and they can not be  
alienated.  
They can not be benefited nor harmed.  
They can not be made noble nor to suffer disgrace.  
This makes them the most noble of all under the  
heavens.

## **Fully present, totally invisible**

Your job is simply to be fully present and  
totally invisible.

People will ignore you. They will forget  
that you are there. They will take  
responsibility for what they love and not  
expect anything else of you.

And when you have disappeared to them  
they will only feel themselves acting within  
the space you helped them create.

57.

Govern your country with integrity,  
Weapons of war can be used with great cunning,  
but loyalty is only won by not-doing.  
How do I know the way things are?  
By these:

The more prohibitions you make,  
the poorer people will be.  
The more weapons you possess,  
the greater the chaos in your country.  
The more knowledge that is acquired,  
the stranger the world will become.  
The more laws that you make,  
the greater the number of criminals.

Therefore the Master says:  
I do nothing,  
and people become good by themselves.  
I seek peace,  
and people take care of their own problems.  
I do not meddle in their personal lives,  
and the people become prosperous.  
I let go of all my desires,  
and the people return to the Uncarved Block.

## Space invaders

Space invaders become more plentiful the more rules you have. Open Space runs on four principles and one law and that is all you need. More than that and people become “space invaders” to you, demanding the open space they were promised.

Resist the temptation to help people by giving them rules of conduct. People know what their work is. Invite them to peace and they will move to peace. Fence them in and they will first try to break out and then move to peace.

Passion bounded by responsibility. That is all.

58.

If a government is unobtrusive,  
the people become whole.  
If a government is repressive,  
the people become treacherous.

Good fortune has its roots in disaster,  
and disaster lurks with good fortune.  
Who knows why these things happen,  
or when this cycle will end?  
Good things seem to change into bad,  
and bad things often turn out for good.  
These things have always been hard to comprehend.

Thus the Master makes things change  
without interfering.  
She is probing yet causes no harm.  
Straightforward, yet does not impose her will.  
Radiant, and easy on the eye.

## Conflict and trouble

There are two ways to deal with things falling apart. You can remain out of the way and let things take their course. Or you can step in and try to control the situation.

The answer is in the fire of trouble. When the people themselves struggle with their own conflicts and are able to take responsibility for resolution, they will find the way that works for themselves. It will be a way of which you are totally unaware. The most you can do is ask a question: What do you really want to do? Why don't you take of it?

Simply embody the hope that there is a way to loosen the struggle and peace will follow.

59.

There is nothing better than moderation  
for teaching people or serving Heaven.  
Those who use moderation  
are already on the path to the Tao.

Those who follow the Tao early  
will have an abundance of virtue.  
When there is an abundance of virtue,  
there is nothing that can not be done.  
Where there is limitless ability,  
then the kingdom is within your grasp.  
When you know the Mother of the kingdom,  
then you will be long enduring.

This is spoken of as the deep root and the firm  
trunk,  
the Way to a long life and great spiritual vision.

## **Embody impossibility**

Open Space should not work. It should be  
impossible to put people together in a room  
with no agenda and have them create  
powerful and transformative conversations.

That's the hard part. Rest in that and the  
impossible becomes possible everywhere  
else.

Governing a large country  
is like frying small fish.  
Too much poking spoils the meat.

When the Tao is used to govern the world  
then evil will loose its power to harm the people.  
Not that evil will no longer exist,  
but only because it has lost its power.  
Just as evil can loose its ability to harm,  
the Master shuns the use of violence.

If you give evil nothing to oppose,  
then virtue will return by itself.

## **Don't tinker**

The moment you begin to tinker, you steal  
the responsibility that holds the body  
together. The darkest shadows therefore  
will seek you out and you will be expected  
to heal them.

Let them dissolve into your space and they  
will heal themselves.

A large country should take the low place like a great watershed, which from its low position assumes the female role. The female overcomes the male by the power of her position. Her tranquility gives rise to her humility.

If a large country takes the low position, it will be able to influence smaller countries. If smaller countries take the lower position, then they can allow themselves to be influenced. So both seek to take the lower position in order to influence the other, or be influenced.

Large countries should desire to protect and help the people, and small countries should desire to serve others. Both large and small countries benefit greatly from humility.

## **Let the centre receive the current**

When the moment of invitation is released, the flood moves in towards you. Abide in the centre for a moment and then move aside and let the centre receive the energy of invitation.

All the intention to improve, to move towards good, to correct, is then directed to the whole itself and everyone is nourished.

The Tao is the tabernacle of creation,  
it is a treasure for those who are good,  
and a place of refuge for those who are not.

How can those who are not good be abandoned?  
Words that are beautiful are worth much,  
but good behavior can only be learned by example.

When a new leader takes office,  
don't give him gifts and offerings.  
These things are not as valuable  
as teaching him about the Tao.

Why was the Tao esteemed by the ancient Masters?  
Is it not said: "With it we find without looking.  
With it we find forgiveness for our transgressions."  
That is why the world can not understand it.

## **Offering Open Space as practice**

All you can do with Open Space is enter it.  
You cannot deplete it, but only make more  
of it.

Be open space and offer it to others as  
practice.



Act by not acting;  
do by not doing.  
Enjoy the plain and simple.  
Find that greatness in the small.  
Take care of difficult problems  
while they are still easy;  
Do easy things before they become too hard.

Difficult problems are best solved while they are easy.  
Great projects are best started while they are small.  
The Master never takes on more than she can handle,  
which means that she leaves nothing undone.

When an affirmation is given too lightly,  
keep your eyes open for trouble ahead.  
When something seems too easy,  
difficulty is hiding in the details.  
The master expects great difficulty,  
so the task is always easier than planned.

## Back up the flow

“Whoever comes is the right people” means that even the smallest group is capable of great depth. If we are able to focus the powerful lens of conversation on the subtle apprehension of issues before they are problems and opportunities before they are solutions, we have the chance to make the small adjustments to take these things to a powerful and positive end.

In action planning then, it is most important simply to find the next thing to do, to create momentum, to commit to carrying forward the momentum of the event, to agree to continue bringing conversation to the subtlest details, currents and streams.

If we deal with the erosive power of water at the highest levels, we can channel it's flow into growth and sustenance without building a dam to impede it downstream.

64.

Things are easier to control while things are quiet.  
Things are easier to plan far in advance.  
Things break easier while they are still brittle.  
Things are easier hid while they are still small.

Prevent problems before they arise.  
Take action before things get out of hand.  
The tallest tree  
begins as a tiny sprout.  
The tallest building  
starts with one shovel of dirt.  
A journey of a thousand miles  
starts with a single foot step.

If you rush into action, you will fail.  
If you hold on too tight, you will loose your grip.

Therefore the Master lets things take their course  
and thus never fails.  
She doesn't hold on to things  
and never looses them.  
By pursing your goals too relentlessly,  
you let them slip away.  
If you are as concerned about the outcome  
as you are about the beginning,  
then it is hard to do things wrong.  
The master seeks no possessions.  
She learns by unlearning,  
thus she is able to understand all things.  
This gives her the ability to help all of creation.

## **Attend to the beginnings**

If we demand to see the results of our work immediately, we are deluding ourselves about the way the world works. We are not capable of massive change with instant actions. The power of leadership comes when we direct our energies to the proper beginnings.

Open Space reveals powerful channels of subtle action often at the growing edge of change. Therefore we need to support this capacity with an excellent invitation that fully understands what this chance is and that attracts people into the space with a sense of undeniably inevitability that THIS conversation may change everything.

And yet, the opening of the day must focus the participants on their ability to sense the opportunities in flow, to play and experiment and to find ways of acting that trust the effects of work downstream.

We can never know; we can only act for good.

65.

The ancient Masters  
who understood the way of the Tao,  
did not educate people, but made them forget.

Smart people are difficult to guide,  
because they think they are too clever.  
To use cleverness to rule a country,  
is to lead the country to ruin.  
To avoid cleverness in ruling a country,  
is to lead the country to prosperity.

Knowing the two alternatives is a pattern.  
Remaining aware of the pattern is a virtue.  
This dark and mysterious virtue is profound.  
It is opposite our natural inclination,  
but leads to harmony with the heavens.

## Freedom shock

We delude ourselves into thinking that we know what's going to happen. We have been schooled this way; to imagine that the answers float in, borne on the wings of an Authority who rules on the quandaries before us.

When we enter open space, these delusions fall away. Only deliberation will save us, and that means trusting into a bigger whole than perhaps we have ever met. It is a shock to be stranded in the flow with no certainty or authority upon which to anchor. But if we are aware of our own capacities to connect and create emergence with others, nothing can stand for long.

Hold space for this, and remember what it feels like to have your world rocked. Your people will benefit from that empathy.

66.

Rivers and seas are rulers  
of the streams of hundreds of valleys  
because of the power of their low position.

If you want to be the ruler of people,

you must speak to them like you are their servant.  
If you want to lead other people,  
you must put their interest ahead of your own.

The people will not feel burdened,  
if a wise person is in a position of power.  
The people will not feel like they are being  
manipulated,  
if a wise person is in front as their leader.  
The whole world will ask for her guidance,  
and will never get tired of her.  
Because she does not like to compete,  
no one can compete with the things she  
accomplishes.

## Coffee cups

Once the space is open, simply move out of  
the way and take Harrison's advice: collect  
coffee cups. It will make the space safer,  
and it will give you something to do that  
serves the group and stays out of its way.  
The group will find unanticipated levels of  
greatness if you stay out of the way.

So to achieve great things, get the coffee  
cups cleared away.

67.

The world talks about honoring the Tao,  
but you can't tell it from their actions.  
Because it is thought of as great,  
the world makes light of it.  
It seems too easy for anyone to use.

There are three jewels that I cherish:  
compassion, moderation, and humility.  
With compassion, you will be able to be brave,  
With moderation, you will be able to give to others,  
With humility, you will be able to become a great  
leader.

To abandon compassion while seeking to be brave,  
or abandoning moderation while being benevolent,  
or abandoning humility while seeking to lead  
will only lead to greater trouble.  
The compassionate warrior will be the winner,  
and if compassion is your defense you will be  
secure.

Compassion is the protector of Heavens salvation.

## Offering out of care

Everyone wants to be free, to have space  
open around them, and it seems an easy  
thing to have in principle.

But to live there, in open space, you must  
see that freedom in terms of what can be  
offered to others. Sharing that hard won  
perspective requires compassion for others,  
moderation in what you offer and humility  
about your own journey and aspirations.

If you can't be compassionate, you can't see  
how Open Space works for others. If you  
are not moderate in your own life, you will  
have nothing to share, and if you relinquish  
humility you create dependence and  
therefore the opposite effect.

You only work this, hold this space and  
offer this gift out of care.

68.

The best warriors  
do not use violence.  
The best generals  
do not destroy indiscriminately.  
The best tacticians  
try to avoid confrontation.  
The best leaders  
become servants of their people.

This is called the virtue of non-competition.  
This is called the power to manage others.  
This is called attaining harmony with the heavens.

## **Managing ease**

Holding space is an act of courage and leadership. It takes resolve to stand still and trust that the people with whom you are working know what to do. You act contrary to what it seems a leader is called to do. You invite rather than compel, cherish diversity rather than a single view, see clarity in the generative nature of complexity.

You invite offerings, shared ideas and collaboration and management becomes so light and easy that the very idea disappears.

69.

There is an old saying:  
"It is better to become the passive  
in order to see what will happen.  
It is better to retreat a foot  
than to advance only an inch."

This is called  
being flexible while advancing,  
pushing back without using force,  
and destroying the enemy without engaging him.

There is no greater disaster  
than underestimating your enemy.  
Underestimating your enemy  
means losing your greatest assets.  
When equal forces meet in battle,  
victory will go to the one  
that enters with the greatest sorrow.

## **The aikido of solutions**

The pressing problems of our time are  
wicked, complex, unanswerable questions.  
How do we feed the world? What is the  
best path to peace? Are we doomed?

These questions themselves arise out of a  
steady movement and negotiation of ideas  
and situations. They sit cunningly at our  
feet and stare into our eyes and infect our  
souls with their pleading. And simple  
answers seem only to feed their power to  
bewilder us.

But they contain the seeds of their own  
answering. We see how they move into our  
sphere and we become like they are,  
pervasive, experimental, seeping into  
consciousness.

If you engage the wicked problems of our  
time with their own tools - passion,  
complexity, diversity and urgency - then  
you retain your own ground and avoid the  
grief of losing your way. But you must  
hold space for that.

See what energy these problems offer and  
use it to move past them with joy and  
spaciousness.

70.

My words are easy to understand  
and easier to put into practice.  
Yet no one in the world seem to understand them,  
and are not able to apply what I teach.

My teachings come from the ancients,  
the things I do are done for a reason.

Because you do not know me,  
you are not able to understand my teachings.  
Because those who know me are few,  
my teachings become even more precious.

## To Being

And ultimately, all of this is just words, just  
a way of talking about what is already  
known. Open Space surrounds you; the  
teachers of this are everywhere. How else  
could self-organization proceed?

Leave the teachings for practice. Leave the  
practice for being.



71.

Knowing you don't know is wholeness.  
Thinking you know is a disease.  
Only by recognizing that you have an illness  
can you move to seek a cure.

The Master is whole because  
she sees her illnesses and treats them,  
and thus is able to remain whole.

## **Curiosity**

There is only one cure for the anxiety of not  
knowing what will happen: curiosity.

Everyone wants to know how it will go.  
Some are sure it will be great; others are  
certain it will be a disaster. What do you  
think?

I don't know. But I'm curious to find out.

72.

When people become overly bold,  
then disaster will soon arrive.

Do not meddle with peoples livelihood;  
by respecting them they will in turn respect you.

Therefore, the Master knows herself but is not  
arrogant.  
She loves herself but also loves others.  
This is how she is able to make appropriate choices.

## **Nothing to say**

You may never need to say the words  
“Open Space.” You may never utter the  
principles and the law. If you have lost  
your sense of wonder, you may fall back on  
tools. But try not to become the expert.  
What the people have done, they have done  
themselves. Leave it with them.

73.

Being over bold and confident is deadly.  
The wise use of caution will keep you alive.

One is the way to death,  
and the other is the way to preserve your life.  
Who can understand the workings of Heaven?

The Tao of the universe  
does not compete, yet wins;  
does not speak, yet responds;  
does not command, yet is obeyed;  
and does act, but is good at directing.

The nets of Heaven are wide,  
but nothing escapes its grasp.

## **Ease as service**

A space easily opened is easily held. A space held with ease is big enough for competition, answers, conclusions and accomplishments, even as it invites collaboration questions, hypotheses and visions. Ease in service of the whole, and inviting all in.

74.

If you do not fear death,  
then how can it intimidate you?  
If you aren't afraid of dying,  
there is nothing you can not do.

Those who harm others  
are like inexperienced boys  
trying to take the place of a great lumberjack.  
Trying to fill his shoes will only get them seriously  
hurt.

## **Whatever happens**

Next to all the words of Open Space,  
Harrison Owen used the word "control"  
most of all. As in "you don't have it, you'll  
never get it, it's all an illusion and to think  
otherwise is to get a sharp lesson from  
whatever is about to happen."

Let go into uncertainty and see what comes.

75.

When people go hungry,  
the governments taxes are too high.  
When people become rebellious,  
the government has become too intrusive.

When people begin to view death lightly,  
wealthy people have too much  
which causes others to starve.

Only those who do not cling to their life can save it.

## **No rules**

There are four principles and one law and  
one invitation. That is all you need.

Anything more than this and people crave  
freedom. Any more rules and people  
abandon their responsibility.

Open space for the people, not for yourself.  
Trust them. They'll make it.

76.

The living are soft and yielding;  
the dead are rigid and stiff.  
Living plants are flexible and tender;  
the dead are brittle and dry.

Those who are stiff and rigid  
are the disciple of death.  
Those who are soft and yielding  
are the disciples of life.

The rigid and stiff will be broken.  
The soft and yielding will overcome.

## **Flow in the marketplace**

Agendas exists solely to control what happens. They are rigid and inflexible in the service of power. But in Open Space invitation in the marketplace is the agenda – flexible, adaptable, all in the service of flowing action.

Agendas come undone with contention, but marketplaces only grow larger and more active with one more offering of passion and responsibility. Left alone, everything that wants to get done can get done.

77.

The Tao of Heaven works in the world  
like the drawing of a bow.  
The top is bent downward;  
the bottom is bent up.  
The excess is taken from,  
and the deficient is given to.

The Tao works to use the excess,  
and gives to that which is depleted.  
The way of people is to take from the depleted,  
and give to those who already have an excess.

Who is able to give to the needy from their excess?  
Only some one who is following the way of the Tao.

This is why the Master gives  
expecting nothing in return.  
She does not dwell on her past accomplishments,  
and does not glory in any praise.

## **Giving space**

There is no higher practice than making  
good. And there is nothing better to give  
than rich, fertile space – space that  
cultivates accumulation of goodness and  
that offers it all back to its source.

78.

Water is the softest and most yielding substance.  
Yet nothing is better than water,  
for overcoming the hard and rigid,  
because nothing can compete with it.

Everyone knows that the soft and yielding  
overcomes the rigid and hard,  
but few can put this knowledge into practice.

Therefore the Master says:  
"Only he who is the lowest servant of the kingdom,  
is worthy to become its ruler.  
He who is willing tackle the most unpleasant tasks,  
is the best ruler in the world."

True sayings seem contradictory.

## **Service in the midst**

Water flows around every obstacle and  
eventually moves them all. When grief and  
sorrow erupt in the space, you are called  
simply to stand in its midst and exercise  
great serenity as you let yourself flow with  
that force. Then you become the most  
valuable resource for the people; standing  
in a place of calm to which their hearts may  
lead them.



79.

Difficulties remain, even after solving a problem.  
How then can we consider that as good?

Therefore the Master  
does what she knows is right,  
and makes no demands of others.  
A virtuous person will do the right thing,  
and persons with no virtue will take advantage of  
others.

The Tao does not choose sides,  
the good person receives from the Tao  
because she is on its side.

## Learning

The responsibility for the quality of your  
experience rests solely with you. If you  
find your experience wanting for  
something, go inside and learn what you  
can about yourself. Hold space also for this  
inquiry in others.

80.

Small countries with few people are best.  
Give them all of the things they want,  
and they will see that they do not need them.  
Teach them that death is a serious thing,  
and to be content to never leave their homes.  
Even though they have plenty  
of horses, wagons and boats,  
they won't feel that they need to use them.  
Even if they have weapons and shields,  
they will keep them out of sight.  
Let people enjoy the simple technologies,  
let them enjoy their food,  
let them make their own clothes,  
let them be content with their own homes,  
and delight in the customs that they cherish.  
Although the next country is close enough  
that they can hear their roosters crowing and dogs  
barking,  
they are content never to visit each other  
all of the days of their life.

## **The practice of peace**

When people are able to meld their passion  
and responsibility, to focus on what gives  
life and is right before them, they set to  
work. And when the invitation is to work  
to contribute to good, their work becomes  
the practice of peace.

Open Space can be the pure practice of  
peace. Holding space can be the highest  
calling.

81.

True words do not sound beautiful;  
beautiful sounding words are not true.  
Wise men don't need to debate;  
men who need to debate are not wise.

Wise men are not scholars,  
and scholars are not wise.  
The Master desires no possessions.  
Since the things she does are for the people,  
she has more than she needs.  
The more she gives to others,  
the more she has for herself.

The Tao of Heaven nourishes by not forcing.  
The Tao of the Wise person acts by not competing.

## **Give it away**

Harrison Owen released Open Space to the world. With few words and a wave of the hand, he offered it to all.

Take a lesson from him. Give more than you are willing to and set your highest work into the world, so all may benefit from the spaces you will hold so beautifully.

## ***Acknowledgments***

*-- To Caitlin, Áine and Finn for holding a space of deep love with me and for sharing our practice ground together.*

*-- To my Open Space teachers Harrison, Michael, Lisa, Birgitt, Peggy, Toke, Larry and Father Brian.*

*-- To the world community of Open Space facilitators who continue to inspire, humour and offer themselves so beautifully to this world.*

*Find out more about Open Space Technology at <http://www.openspaceworld.org>*

*Please, pass this on.*