

The TAO of TENNIS

Ancient Eastern Wisdom
Adapted for Life on the Court



*"You have to find it.
No one else can find it for you."*

Björn Borg

BOB WARDEN

“Bob Warden’s *The Tao of Tennis* is an authentic application of the *Tao Te Ching* in his effort to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary -- that is, in his attempt to elevate the game of tennis to become an elegant and compelling way of life. His reading of the text from a uniquely ‘tennis’ perspective is nuanced and insightful, and his apposite and persistently original interpretations will raise both the eyebrows and a smile from devotees of the king’s game as they ponder the wisdom of this antique text.”

-- Roger T. Ames, Ph.D., professor of Chinese philosophy, University of Hawai’i at Manoa.

“*The Tao of Tennis* is an intriguing blend of tennis coaching and ancient Eastern philosophy. Bob's adaptation contains nuggets of sage advice, though, as with the original [Tao Te Ching], there are passages that may not seem totally comprehensible to the modern reader. If you can get past this the book is a worthy read. There is certainly much good in it.”

-- Allen Fox, Ph.D., Intercollegiate Tennis Association Hall of Fame player (UCLA) and coach (Pepperdine), and author of [*Tennis: Winning the Mental Match*](#).

The Tao of Tennis
by Bob Warden

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Dedication

This book is humbly dedicated to my wife, my sons, my brother, my friends at Boeing Employees Tennis Club, and especially to my amazing parents who, after all these years, still regularly come out to the courts and watch their boy play the game he loves.

Introduction

If it was totally comprehensible it wouldn't be Tao! This book is a chapter by chapter adaptation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, the twenty-five hundred year old classic work of Chinese wisdom literature. I'll leave it to the interested reader to Google "Tao Te Ching" for in depth information.

In a nutshell, the Tao Te Ching has three basic themes. The primary one is a broad theory of metaphysics, the traditional branch of philosophy that, according to Wikipedia, "attempts to clarify the fundamental notions by which people understand the world, e.g., existence, objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect, and possibility." The second theme concerns how individuals should act so as to be in harmony with the world. The third concerns how to be a leader in harmony with the world.

It's important to note that the Tao Te Ching's counsel is pragmatic, not moralistic. We are advised to act a certain way not because it's the ethical thing to do, but because it's the sensible thing to do; to do otherwise would be counterproductive.

I undertook this project with two purposes in mind. The first was to apply the Tao Te Ching specifically to the sport of tennis. It has always applied to tennis (as it does to all human endeavors), but I wanted to make the connection explicit. My second goal was to stay true to the simple and succinct style of the traditional English translations. One of my favorite aspects of the Tao Te Ching is that it's fairly easy to read, but challenging to comprehend.

If I've done what I set out to do you will spend considerably more time thinking about these eighty-one brief chapters than actually reading them. As Björn Borg said, "You have to find it. No one else can find it for you." The Tao Te Ching is a map, not a destination.

One

If it can be captured with words it isn't Tao. Our collective vocabulary is inadequate.

A coach describing how to hit a backhand does not enable a novice to hit a backhand. A coach demonstrating a backhand does not enable a novice to hit a backhand. Only through a receptive mind and the direct experience of practice can a novice learn to hit a backhand.

Tao is a label for how the universe works. Tao can't be defined but it can be understood. Assigning labels and categories to various aspects of the universe creates the illusion of understanding. But observing and experiencing without prejudice or preconception is the only path to real understanding.

Two

Without bad days there could be no good days. Good has no meaning independent of bad. There is beauty in the world only because there is ugliness. Winter is cold only because summer is hot.

Rafael Nadal is fast and strong only because the rest of us are comparatively slow and weak. If every woman in the world played like Serena Williams then no one would be any good.

Any pair that can be conceived as opposites depend on each other for their very meaning.

Champions make use of many tools, expending minimal energy while achieving maximum results. Roger Federer glides around quietly and respectfully dominating his opponents, hitting any shot with ease from anywhere on the court.

Three

Not glorifying star players keeps them grounded. Not valuing some above others prevents jealousy. Not envying the talent of others allows a player to focus on developing her own talent.

The wise coach operates by providing players the tools they need to succeed without feeding their egos. Strengthening skills without inflating ambition.

Four

Tao encompasses everything. The source and principle underlying the universe.

Tao maintains balance. Blunting the sharp, honing the dull. Returning the serve, poaching the return.

Tao is obvious but counter-intuitive. Hidden in plain view. Everywhere all the time.

Five

The universe doesn't discriminate. The force of gravity is the same on both sides of the net. The lines on the court are human inventions. The universe doesn't recognize borders.

Tao is like a bellows that animates the universe. The wise player accepts what her opponent offers and doesn't fight against the wind.

Six

Tennis is not a contest of maximum ball velocity. Champions dampen and diffuse pace. They use spin and subtlety to keep opponents off balance.

Don't be afraid to hit a drop shot.

Seven

The universe is selfless. Tao has no agenda.

The effective coach stays in the background, guiding without seeking credit. The essence of leadership is service.

Eight

The highest level of performance is like water. Water nourishes without striving. It follows the path of least resistance though its power is immense.

Keep your mind quiet and grounded. Keep your focus in the present, each point is the only point. Be respectful and gracious to your opponent. Be honest and fair, if you don't see the ball out, it's in. Always give your best effort on court.

Avoid controversy. Without controversy there is no blame.

Nine

Fill a glass to the brim and it's likely to spill. Work excessively on one aspect of your game and other aspects suffer.

If you seek perfection you become a slave to the unobtainable. If you crave status and wealth the envious can destroy you.

It's enough to work with the intent and desire only to become the best player you can. More than enough, it's everything.

Ten

From within your own mind and body can you see there's no real distinction? Navigating through a stressful world can you relax and appreciate its beauty with the eyes of a child? Can you calmly attend to the present and see without distortion?

Can you coach others to their highest potential without taking credit or seeking recognition? Can you recognize when to step back and let events run their course? Can you set aside what you're sure you know in order to see what's real?

Learn a skill and practice to improve. Take ownership of your natural talents while recognizing that you received them by chance. Work without expectation of material reward. Facilitate without directing.

Eleven

A racquet is composed of a frame and strings but it's the gaps between the strings that let us control the ball. A hopper is made of metal or plastic but we carry and store balls in the space inside. A court is surrounded by fences or walls but we play and practice in the expanse in the middle.

We work with the tangible while relying on the intangible.

Twelve

Seeing everything at once is blinding. Hearing all sounds together is deafening. Tasting many flavors in combination dulls the palate. Seeking material wealth bankrupts the soul. Thinking too much weakens the mind.

Champions are aware of everything around them but stay focused on the ball.

Thirteen

Trying to keep a lead is as dangerous as trying to come from behind. Hope is the same thing as fear.

Why is trying to keep a lead as dangerous as trying to come from behind? Whether winning or losing your position is tenuous. Circumstances change quickly. Don't think about being ahead or behind. Stay in the moment and play each ball as it comes.

What does it mean that hope is the same thing as fear? Both hope and fear are impostors conjured by a mind fixated on itself. When we see the self as part of a larger whole there is nothing to fear.

Recognize your limitations and play within them. Don't think about the score. Just hit the ball.

Fourteen

It's not possible to perceive Tao with the senses because Tao is intangible. But Tao is in effect everywhere all the time. It's inseparable from the universe.

Relax, thinking too hard about Tao just makes it more difficult to grasp.

Fifteen

Björn Borg knew Tao. Nicknamed the Angelic Assassin, his game was steady and relentless. He won eleven of the twenty-seven grand slam singles tournaments he entered; the best ratio of any male in the open era.

He was cautious, almost always choosing the highest percentage shot. He was alert, seemingly never losing his ice cold focus. He was polite, never disrespecting opponents or officials. He was the quickest and most fit player of his generation.

His face was blank like uncarved wood. His mind was as uncluttered as a valley, clear as spring water.

Can you wait for your mud to settle so as to see with clarity? Can you be still until it's time to act? When you act without desire you accomplish your best work.

Sixteen

Relax and see beyond presumptions.

All beings are cyclical. Like a flower, each arises from the elements, blossoms, then returns to the elements.

We value the flower precisely because it's fleeting. Recognition of this brings wisdom. Acceptance brings peace.

Only Tao is constant. To know this is to be selfless, calm, kind, and amused.

Life is precious only because it ends. To know this is to live without fear.

Seventeen

The best coaches are taken for granted by their players. Next are those who are recognized and admired. Next come coaches who are feared. Last are those who are hated.

Coaches who don't trust their players get no trust in return. The best coaches value their words and use them sparingly.

When a match is coached with skill and humility the player thinks he did it himself.

Eighteen

When a player loses touch with Tao he can become over-confident. When a coach forgets what is true she thinks she has all the answers. When there is conflict within the team players obey out of duty. A team in crisis looks for a scapegoat.

Nineteen

Play without trying or thinking and your shots will be cleaner and more accurate. Play without concern for your opponent and you'll treat each other with dignity and respect. Play without ambition for status and wealth and no one will be jealous.

Keep it simple. Give your best effort without expectations. Relax and hit each ball as it comes.

Twenty

Stop thinking too much, just hit the ball. So what if your form doesn't quite fit someone else's ideal? If it works don't worry what others think.

Pretenders pump their fists and celebrate after big points. The time to celebrate is after the match is won. Don't show up your opponent. Focus on the next point.

Pretenders get angry when they're not playing well and let frustration derail their game. Don't dwell on the past. Move on to the next point with an empty mind.

Pretenders try to out-think their opponents as if they were playing chess. Tennis is a martial art. Instinctive fluid action is far more effective than thinking.

Pretenders try to impose their will. Better to flow like water and take advantage of what your opponent allows.

That's playing within yourself. That's Tao.

Twenty-one

Champions never lose sight of Tao. But how can you ever have had sight of something that can't be perceived with the senses?

Tao can't be perceived directly, but its manifestations are everywhere and in plain view. Tao is at the core of every aspect and action in the universe. It's obvious if you look through child-like eyes.

Twenty-two

Absorb your opponent's pace and you become powerful. Empty your mind and you become wise. Push yourself to exhaustion and you become strong. Discard ambition and you reach great heights. Champions know this.

Michael Chang beat Ivan Lendl in the 1989 French Open by absorbing and redirecting Lendl's pace. Borg's vacant expression masked the most focused mind in tennis. Martina Navratilova dominated her era only after adopting an intense fitness program. Kim Clijsters came out of retirement with less ambition and achieved greater success.

Champions don't need to brag, their greatness is obvious. They don't call attention to themselves yet everyone sees them.

Twenty-three

A tornado doesn't last all day. A lightning strike takes only an instant. Nothing in nature endures. Dwelling on the past is pointless. When you hit a bad shot forget it and focus on the next ball.

Players who stay in the moment are in harmony with Tao. Stay in the moment and you'll play free and loose. Fret over the last point or the next and you'll tighten up.

Trust yourself to succeed and you will. Trust yourself to fail and you will.

Twenty-four

Overreach and you're likely to fall. Go full speed and you'll soon tire. Call attention to yourself and you won't be taken seriously.

Don't make excuses and people will respect you. Don't seek credit and people will give it. Don't brag, your game speaks for itself.

Playing in harmony with Tao is like eating at a buffet. The fact that you have the ability to gorge yourself doesn't mean that you should.

Twenty-five

There is something bigger than everything. It seems infinite. It's greater than the universe and anything that lies beyond.

It's in action everywhere all the time. It's the mother of all things. Not being able to adequately define or describe it, we just call it Tao.

Tao is the only constant in a universe of endless motion. Only Tao endures. It goes on and out forever, while also coming back to the beginning.

Tao is great. The universe is great. The earth is great. Humans have the potential for greatness.

If you're in harmony with Tao you're in harmony with the earth. Earth is in harmony with the universe. The universe is in harmony with Tao. Tao is harmony.

Twenty-six

To cover the expanse of the court the mind must be calm. The more active the body the more relaxed must be the head.

A champion in the midst of a challenging match is well aware of the tools at her disposal. She effortlessly chooses the right shot, calmly undistracted by other options.

Maintaining focus is crucial. If your mind isn't in the moment your movements will be rigid and forced. To be restless is to lose control.

Twenty-seven

A good walker doesn't leave tracks. A good speaker doesn't stutter. A good counter doesn't use her fingers.

A wise coach has time to help all her players and doesn't neglect anyone. She uses her skills creatively and efficiently, not wasting time or effort.

What is a good player? A teacher of bad players. What is a bad player? A potential good player. A coach who fails to grasp this cannot get the most out of the team.

Twenty-eight

Be like water. The same river has turbulent rapids and gentle pools. Work on strength and power but practice touch and finesse. Don't think too much, just do what the situation calls for.

Recognize dishonesty but act honorably. You are what you do. Set a high standard for yourself. Meet that standard and you can accomplish anything worth accomplishing.

Act honorably but don't be proud of yourself. High mountains are impressive to look at but low valleys with their rivers are the source of life. Be humble and you will awaken to see things as they are.

An uncarved block has raw potential. A skilled woodcarver uses a light touch, obtaining maximum utility from a minimum of cutting.

Twenty-nine

Do you think you can improve the universe? Thinking so is the height of arrogance. The universe is inherently perfect. It can't be improved.

If you try to change something to fit your ideal it will be ruined. If you try to hold on to something as it is it will be lost.

Sometimes there is happiness, sometimes sadness. Sometimes there is strength, sometimes weakness. Sometimes there is a need to push, sometimes to rest. Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes behind.

Champions embrace humility and avoid extremes.

Thirty

Controlled aggression is key to success in tennis. But uncontrolled aggression, the result of anger, is almost never effective. Uncontrolled aggression will win some spectacular points but lose many more.

Champions win by playing within their abilities. Be aggressive but don't lose control. Champions win while respecting their opponents. Be aggressive but don't embarrass your opponent. Champions win through confidence in their abilities. Be confident but not arrogant. Champions win by doing what needs to be done and nothing more.

A needless show of force wastes a player's strength. Hot fires burn out quickly. Tao is moderation.

Thirty-one

Tennis is a zero sum game, one player must lose in order for the other to win. Champions know how losing feels and this knowledge makes them gracious winners.

There's a difference between celebrating success and reveling in an opponent's failure. Champions take the greatest pleasure in playing their best, victory is a byproduct.

Losing hurts worse than winning feels good. Keep that in mind at the moment of victory.

Thirty-two

Tao is the essence of simplicity though it defies conscious understanding. If players could fully grasp and apply Tao then coaching would be unnecessary and no shots would ever miss.

Because we are unable to comprehend the unity of Tao we categorize and name what we perceive as distinct manifestations. Our labels are useful to a point but they also complicate. Tao is as simple and inevitable as a river flowing to the sea.

Thirty-three

Understanding what motivates others is intelligence. Understanding what motivates yourself is wisdom. Mastering others requires force. Mastering yourself requires strength.

True wealth springs from realizing that you already have everything you need. With patience and persistence you can accomplish everything worth doing.

Do what is called for by the circumstances of the moment and your game will play itself. Be present each and every shot and your best tennis will flow naturally.

Thirty-four

Tao is in effect always and everywhere. It drives the universe without calling attention to itself.

Tao is the unifying principle behind everything yet has no substance or will. It is all and nothing. The beginning and the end.

Like Federer's quiet domination, Tao accomplishes everything without appearing to accomplish anything. The key to true greatness.

Thirty-five

Easygoing people are comfortable to be around. Going with the flow is more satisfying than fighting the current.

Powerful ground strokes and overheads are exciting to hit and to watch. Consistently deep well-placed balls with medium pace are comparatively boring. But just as the jab is necessary to set up the knockout punch, conservative ground strokes set up winners.

Success comes from leveraging what your opponent gives you. No more and no less.

Thirty-six

That which grows smaller must first be large. That which grows weaker must first be strong.
That which falls must first rise. That which receives must first give.

So it is that steady and consistent play wins the match.

Thirty-seven

Tao doesn't do anything but everything gets done. Action without intention. If you play with an uncluttered mind your best tennis results as a matter of course. Success is elusive when you focus on it.

Trying too hard impedes accomplishment. Relax and it will come.

Thirty-eight

Champions don't think about how great they are though they are great. Pretenders talk about how great they are though they are not.

Champions make tennis look easy. Pretenders make it look like hard work.

Wise coaches do all that needs to be done but don't seem to do much of anything. Well-meaning coaches work hard but much is left undone. Authoritarian coaches expend valuable energy trying to force players to do what doesn't need to be done.

Coaching in harmony with Tao gives rise to peak performance. Coaching with good intentions is less effective. Coaching founded on authority is counterproductive.

Thirty-nine

Tao makes the sky clear, the earth firm, the spirit strong, the valley fertile, and all living things alive. Thus the sky, earth, spirit, valley, and all living things are manifestations of the whole. Without Tao the whole collapses.

Humility is the root of greatness. The low comes before the high. Champions know that success is not a matter of right, and that wealth can be hard to distinguish from poverty.

Diamonds are revered as precious but their strength comes from being stone.

Forty

Success doesn't follow an uninterrupted rising path. Andre Agassi won five of his eight grand slam singles titles after falling out of the top one hundred and fighting his way back up through tennis' minor league.

Progress often comes only after taking a few steps backward in order to find a more effective way forward.

Forty-one

The wise player hears about Tao and adjusts his behavior. The average player hears about Tao and forgets it. The thoughtless player hears about Tao and makes fun of it. It wouldn't be Tao if fools didn't laugh at it.

This is because the bright path seems dark. The way forward looks like retreat. The simple seems difficult. Great power seems impotent. Great purity seems profane. Great virtue seems impious.

The finest form can't be discerned. The highest note can't be heard. The greatest beauty can't be seen. The greatest thought can't be expressed.

Tao can't be seen or articulated. Tao precedes seeing and articulation. The source and strength of everything.

Forty-two

Tao made the universe. The universe made humanity. Humanity made tennis.

Tennis incorporates yin and yang, female and male, finesse and power.

Players don't like to think of themselves as weak, clumsy, or vulnerable. But at times we are all these things. Champions know this and succeed anyway.

An ugly win is a win. A pretty loss is a loss.

A player who relies excessively on either power or finesse can lose quickly if his narrow skill set breaks down. There's often a fine line between winner and unforced error. Champions work to broaden their skills so as to open multiple paths to victory.

Forty-three

The softest substance in the world overcomes the hardest. Water carves canyons from solid stone. This is the power of unconscious action.

Coaching without directing, playing without thinking, easier said than done.

Forty-four

What's more valuable, fame or self? What's more precious, integrity or wealth? What's more painful, winning or losing?

Attachment to fame makes you a slave to the opinions of others. Obsession with material riches leads to moral bankruptcy. Fixation on winning precedes losing.

Give your best effort on court knowing that the outcome will be what it will be.

Forty-five

Losing close matches seems pointless but teaches valuable lessons. Lessons learned from losing close matches seem worthless but the wisdom gained is priceless.

The most direct route seems circuitous. The greatest skill looks awkward. The greatest eloquence sounds like nonsense.

Comfort in cold weather comes from moving. Comfort in hot weather comes from being still. Comfort on court comes from being calm and aware.

Forty-six

When a coach teaches in harmony with Tao players work productively and improve together.
When a coach teaches with ego and authority players seek to impose their will.

The greatest hindrance to effective tennis is reverence of self. The best way to lose a lead is to worry about keeping it. The surest way to lose a match is to try too hard to win it.

Knowing that enough is enough is enough to know.

Forty-seven

You can know the world without leaving your room. You can develop an effective serve without aping Pete Sampras. The harder you try the less you succeed.

Champions know without seeking, see without looking, win by not trying.

Forty-eight

With tennis, every day on court increases skill. With Tao, every day on court reduces the extraneous.

Champions waste little energy as they move and strike with simple efficiency. The less complicated the motion the more effective the result.

Champions succeed by going with the current, pretenders fail by trying to control it.

Forty-nine

A champion has no mind of her own. Instead she strives to see from her opponent's perspective.

A champion is respectful to opponents who are respectful to her as well as to those who are not. That's genuine respect. A champion treats with dignity opponents who treat her with dignity as well as those who do not. That's genuine dignity.

Pretenders worry and evaluate. Champions handle what comes their way without anxiety, acting with child-like clarity.

Fifty

Pretenders obsess about winning because they fear losing. But to search for victory is to find defeat. The tools of success become the instruments of failure.

Champions focus on seeing and hitting the ball and don't worry about the outcome. They know that while they may control their reactions to the ball they have no control over who wins and loses the match.

Preoccupation with an uncontrollable result doesn't help, but can hurt. Champions know this, and don't beat themselves.

Fifty-one

All beings are formed from matter and shaped by their environment. They arise from and are sustained by Tao. So it is that all beings contain the essence of perfection.

All beings naturally but unconsciously know Tao. This is because Tao nourishes and gives life, nurtures and feeds, protects and comforts.

Creating without possessing, accomplishing without taking credit, coaching without dictating. That's Tao.

Fifty-two

Tao is the mother of everything. To know the mother is to know the children. To know the children is to know the mother. To know this is to live without fear.

Shut your mouth and hit the ball and all will be well. Run your mouth and worry about your game or the score and you'll be in trouble.

Perceiving what is small is insight. Defending what is weak is strength. Pay attention to Tao and nothing can harm you.

Fifty-three

Champions accomplish without bragging or making excuses. Pretenders boast and rationalize but don't accomplish much.

Pretenders love money and worldly goods but their souls are impoverished. In focusing on the facade they neglect the foundation.

To wear designer clothes, drive extravagant cars, or otherwise worship money is to be a thief and to defile Tao.

Fifty-four

Bad habits are hard to break. Fortunately so are good habits. We are what we do, our habits define us.

Cultivate virtue in your behavior and you will become virtuous. Cultivate virtue in your family and virtue will grow. Cultivate virtue in your community and virtue will become an expectation. Cultivate virtue in your country and virtue will be the norm. Cultivate virtue in the world and virtue will reign.

A pebble dropped in the sea impacts the furthest shore.

Fifty-five

A champion is like an infant. An infant is fearless because he doesn't know he can be hurt. He has weak bones and delicate muscles but a firm grip. He hasn't known a mate but has the necessary equipment. He has energy to cry and fuss all day without losing his voice. He's in perfect harmony with the universe.

To be in harmony with the universe is to know the eternal. To know the eternal is to know Tao.

Seeking to prolong the finite is vanity. We are waves on an ocean, fleeting manifestations of the eternal.

Fifty-six

Champions know but don't brag. Pretenders brag but don't know.

Keep your mouth shut. Be calm and focused. Don't seek the spotlight. Choose your battles.

Champions take everything in stride, friends and foes, approval and criticism, winning and losing. Acting in harmony with the universe leads to peak performance.

Fifty-seven

Prepare with hard work and repetition. Compete with calmness and creativity. Win by not trying.

Play within the rules but without constraint. Be aggressive but not excessive. Hit high percentage shots while avoiding the flashy and clever. Work with what your opponent gives you rather than seeking to impose your will.

Champions expend the minimum effort necessary to get the job done. They have no enemies because they treat their opponents fairly. They don't show off but everyone sees them. They succeed because they don't worry about the outcome.

Fifty-eight

When a coach employs moderation players play within themselves. When a coach employs authority players try to impose their will.

Winning is a function of losing. Losing is a function of winning. The outcome is unknowable until it arrives.

Proper stroke technique today becomes improper tomorrow. Today's winning strategy becomes tomorrow's recipe for failure. The pace of change can bewilder.

So the wise coach shapes without cutting, encourages without criticizing, enlightens without blinding.

Fifty-nine

Effective coaching is rooted in restraint. Restraint is rooted in humility.

The wise coach knows his players and tailors his advice. He taps into the collective expertise of the coaching community. A closed mind is limiting. An open mind is broadening.

Plant deep roots in fertile soil. Take the long view and allow nature to run its course.

Sixty

Coaching a team requires managing personalities. The wise coach allows players to express their individuality within reasonable boundaries drawn to ensure the team's needs are met. A delicate balancing act.

Such moderation minimizes discord. It doesn't eliminate it but helps prevent it from escalating into unproductive conflict. Like the steam valve on a pressure cooker.

Sixty-one

The female overcomes the male by submitting. Champions win by turning their opponents' strengths against them.

Neutralize a power player by absorbing pace and imparting spin. Neutralize a fast player by jamming him with body shots.

Champions control the pace and pattern of play by leveraging what their opponents give them. They dominate by yielding.

Sixty-two

Tao is the enduring basis of everything. Embrace it or fight it, the outcome will be the same. Wealthy or poor, strong or weak, Tao doesn't discriminate.

Big talk can buy honor, but virtuous action gains respect. So it is that all enlightened beings are rich.

Champions don't fear any opponent. They transcend intimidation through thorough preparation and attentive exploitation of weaknesses. So it is that the seemingly invincible can be defeated.

Sixty-three

Practice unconscious action. Do without doing. Calmly focus on the ball and let your body do what it does.

What seems complicated is really numerous simple actions working in harmony. Focus on the fundamentals and everything is easy.

Champions see the simplicity underlying the complex. They tackle small difficulties before they become big problems. They achieve greatness by not confronting great challenges.

Sixty-four

It's easy to keep your poise if you don't lose it. Once gone it's difficult to retrieve. The fragile is easily shattered and the small easily scattered. Work to strengthen your composure in practice so that it won't disappear during the match.

A giant California redwood starts as a tiny seed. A thousand-foot skyscraper begins as a hole in the ground. A five-set marathon match begins with a single serve.

Conscious action defeats its intended purpose. Grasping to hold on leads to loss. Champions don't try so they don't fail. They aren't attached to winning so they don't lose.

Players often taste defeat right after the verge of victory. Play the end the same as the beginning.

Champions work to free themselves from desire. They don't crave material reward. They don't cling to fashionable ideas. They see what others overlook. They work with what is rather than try to create what isn't.

Sixty-five

Wise coaches don't burden players with too much information because they know that hinders real learning. They know their job is to peel away layers of complexity, not add more.

Coaches who rely on cleverness retard player potential. Coaches who emphasize simplicity unleash player potential. To know this is to know Tao.

Sixty-six

Why is the ocean greater than a hundred rivers? Because it's beneath them.

The wise coach doesn't get in the way. She leads from below, guides from behind. She knows her calling is to facilitate others' success, not feed her own ego.

So it is that the wise coach gets the most out of her players. Directing without controlling, leading without calling attention to herself.

Sixty-seven

People say Tao is great in theory but inconceivable in practice. All greatness is inconceivable. What's conceivable is commonplace.

The three treasures are compassion, moderation, and humility. Only the compassionate are truly brave. Only the moderate are truly generous. Only the humble can effectively lead.

Presuming to be brave without compassion, to be generous without moderation, or to lead without humility will only end in failure.

Compassion is sword and shield, offense and defense, glue and grease.

Sixty-eight

Champions don't act out of anger, arrogance, or vengeance, so they don't provoke anger, arrogance, or vengeance from their opponents. Speak softly and carry a big stick.

Sixty-nine

It's more effective to feed off your opponent's power than to initiate your own, easier to defend an attack than to make one.

Champions often let unfamiliar opponents go on offense first so as to assess what they're up against. Consider receiving serve if you win the spin. Make your opponent show his cards before you do.

A champion never underestimates his opponent. Overconfidence is the surest path to defeat. So it is that the underdog wins the battle.

Seventy

Lao Tzu wrote in plain language about the most basic concept in the world yet not many understand or apply his counsel.

He spoke from antiquity. He acted with moderation. Humble and ordinary, few people know him and even fewer try.

His followers were belittled. His critics were honored. So it is that the wise man keeps a low profile.

Seventy-one

Knowing your weaknesses is strength. Denying them is sickness. Champions aren't sick because they became sick of being sick. They know their weaknesses and work to improve. Pretenders deny their weaknesses by trying to work around them.

Seventy-two

Not fearing what should be feared leads to catastrophe. Fearing what needn't be feared leads to slavery.

Don't embarrass your opponent and he won't have cause for retaliation. Treat your opponent with dignity and you'll get the same.

A champion knows he's great but doesn't flaunt it. He's self-confident, not arrogant. Embracing humility, a champion needn't fear any opponent.

Seventy-three

Aggression amplified by passion leads to self-destruction. Aggression tempered by tranquility leads to victory. Why is this? It's a mystery.

Tao doesn't compete yet always wins. Doesn't speak yet is answered. Doesn't ask yet is fulfilled. Doesn't follow the direct route yet arrives first. Casts a wide net with open mesh yet nothing gets through.

Seventy-four

If players are not afraid to lose it does no good to threaten penalties for code violations. If players fear losing, and violating the code means they'll be penalized, why would they dare violate the code?

Tournament officials bear a heavy burden. Before you second guess ask yourself if you would want to carry it. That would be like operating an industrial chain saw with no training. The cost of a mistake can be enormous.

Seventy-five

Players get frustrated when a coach takes credit for their success. Players rebel when a coach seeks to control everything. Players stop caring about winning when a coach puts winning above integrity. It's better to lose honestly than to win by cheating.

Seventy-six

Babies are born soft and flexible, corpses are buried hard and stiff. Living plants are succulent and green, dead plants are dry and brown. So it is that the stiff and unyielding are apprentices of death while the yielding and flexible are full of life.

An unbending tree will snap in a stiff wind. A player pursuing a willful strategy has only one narrow path to victory. The headstrong lose and the adaptable win.

Seventy-seven

Tao is like the service motion. The racquet goes up, the tossed ball comes down, and there's an explosion of energy where they meet in the middle.

Tao redirects energy from where it is to where it needs to be. Most people do the opposite, pushing the poor ever lower in order to raise the rich even higher. Only the enlightened have more than they need and namelessly give it away to the world.

So it is that the wise work without recognition, achieve without seeking credit, accomplish without showing off.

Seventy-eight

Water is soft and yielding. Yet it sculpts solid stone and hard earth into canyons and valleys. So it is that water is the most powerful substance in the world.

The weak defeat the strong. The soft overcome the hard. Everyone knows this but few apply it.

Deflect your opponent's offense and he's on defense. Reflect your opponent's power and he's powerless. Truth is paradox.

Seventy-nine

After a tough match it's natural for the defeated player to harbor some resentment. How can peace be preserved? By winning with humility and grace. A champion defeats her opponent without beating her. She overcomes without overdoing. Does what needs to be done and no more.

Tao doesn't play favorites. What goes around comes around.

Eighty

Once there was a small country with few inhabitants. They had machines to make their work more efficient but didn't use them. They had boats and carriages but never traveled far. They had weapons and shields but never displayed them. Their food was plain but nutritious, their clothes fine but simple, their homes modest but elegant.

There was another small country close by. So close that they could hear dogs bark at night and roosters crow at dawn. Yet they kept to themselves, living peacefully and dying content.

Eighty-one

Pretty words aren't true and true words aren't pretty. Virtuous people don't quarrel and people who quarrel aren't virtuous. The wise aren't educated and the educated aren't wise.

Champions give back to the game that gives so much to them. The more generous they are the greater their own abundance. Tao profits without taking, does without outdoing. The way of the wise.

[About the Author](#)

Bob Warden is a professional tennis instructor and coach. He's worked with youth and adults, novices and advanced players. A two-time graduate of the University of Washington, Bob's formal studies concentrated in philosophy, English, law, and leadership. He lives near Seattle with his wife Grace, sons Kenneth and Carson, and cats Jasmine and Rajah.

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