



*The  
Way  
of  
Stones*



*by*

**Michael Feinberg**

The man of Tao  
remains unknown

Perfect virtue  
produces nothing

No self is true self

And the greatest man  
is nobody

— *Chuang Tzu*

*One misty spring morning in 1989, in the remote mountains of China's Han Shan province, a mendicant monk of the Northern School of the White Crane branch of Taoism walked silently out through the front gates of the Heavenly Peak Temple.*

*The monk carried a stone board, a set of seventy-two carved stone pieces, and an ancient scroll inscribed with brush and ink in elegant calligraphic script.*

*He also carried with him a secret which had lain cloistered and hidden for thousands of years.*



The enigma first surfaced in 1961 when an archeological dig in the Sarsen district of northern England uncovered a stone board buried among Druidic remains.

The board, which was later carbon-dated to before the Wessex Bronze Age, had ninety-six squares etched into its surface, arranged twelve squares across by eight down. Fragments of what appeared to be runestones inscribed with strange characters were found in a pile close by, gathered in such a way that they might once have been held in a pouch of leather or bark that long ago had rotted to dust.

A few months later a board of similar design was found in the sarcophagus of an obscure Egyptian Pharaoh. And a few months after that, another board was discovered at the site of a previously unexplored Hopi pueblo in central New Mexico.

Through the course of the 1960s, stone boards of remarkably similar design and dimension were uncovered in the Israeli desert (accompanied by stone fragments engraved with Kabbalahc icons), in a cave in the Nepalese highlands, in a Mayan pyramid, and on a backwoods path in northern Japan beside an altar to the nature spirit *Izanagi*.

Historians and archeologists, trying to make sense of these findings, conjectured an explanation for the boards based on references from ancient writings. Apparently, a system of philosophy and divination based on a "Rule of Four" had sprung up separately in several of the world's ancient civilizations. Although archeological technologies dated the boards back to disparate times and locations, each version could be traced to a similar seminal point in the evolution of the individual culture that had created it.

Every culture visualized and described the "Rule of Four" in its own way:



Four Stones Meditation • Way of the Four Winds • The Fourth Oracle



Path of the Four Directions • Four Point Runic Cross

Over the past 28 years, archeologists, mythologists, philosophers, and historians have tried to make whole the puzzle of the stones, learning what they could from fragments of stone and writings gathered the world over.

And now, through the instrument of a lone anonymous Taoist monk, the answer has finally been provided.



He called himself Fei Mi-jai, though there is no reason to believe that was his real name. He described himself as just a monk, without station or status at the monastery. He had been brought there when just a child, and assigned the daily practice of carrying water from the well and chopping wood for the fire. He was told that task would remain his only practice until he had mastered it fully.

He would be forty years incarnate on the full moon this May. But his practice had yet remained unchanged.

One day the Grand Master approached Fei Mi-jai with a special task. First he handed the monk a faded rice-paper scroll. Then, placing the sacred temple stones in the monk's hand, he gave him this instruction: "Take these and walk to the River of Dolphins. When you reach it, continue along its banks until you come to a confluence of time and space, when/where the silence is louder than the river rapids. Then sit there and wait. Give the stones to the very first person who happens by and tell him about them. When you have completed this task, return to the monastery immediately!"

The monk ventured forth and did exactly as he was told. He found the confluence and sat there in meditation. Eight days he sat without moving until, finally, a solitary stranger passed his way.



This man was taller than most, and the monk (who was schooled in the Ways) recognized him immediately as the sorcerer Ehsarai. When their gazes met, the sorcerer's eyes began glowing the color of "rare blue jade." And in those eyes the monk could see the reflection of his own eyes, and that they, too, were glowing the color of morning sky. In that instant a dolphin burst through the river's surface and somersaulted into the air, chirruping a joyous song of life.

As one the two men sat upon the earth, and Fei Mi-jai prepared a pot of tea. They drank in silence, contemplating the sound of currents lapping at the river's edge, and absorbing the warm sunlight reflecting off its surface.

Then the monk unrolled the crumbling parchment, and readied to tell the tale.

Those familiar with Chinese metaphor will recognize the tall, blue-eyed “sorcerer” as a westerner. Whether sorcerer or not, a magician of some sort was still required to receive the stones, carry them across the Great Ocean, and give them back to the world.

Keep in mind that the myth recounted here is a Chinese rendition, and that each culture — whether Japanese, Native American, Egyptian, Mayan, Hebrew, or other — weaves the tale somewhat differently, using characters and symbolism drawn from its own cosmology. As mythologist Joseph Campbell reminded us: though told in many voices, there is but one myth.

The Chinese called it *Shih Tao*, the ancient Celts called it *Runa futhark*, the Mayan Indians called it *Kami-a-hota*, and the Japanese called it *Ishidō*. Yet, regardless of origin, when translated the names all mean one thing, *The Way of Stones*.

What follows is the *Legend of the Stones*, as transmitted by Fei Mi-jai to Ehsarai.





*In a voice strong and clear, he began the telling  
by chanting the ancient verses:*

Life, when it came to be,  
Bore one, then two, then three.  
And thus the three began:  
Heaven and earth and man.  
And when wont to seek life's core,  
the Tao gave them the Rule of Four.

**1**

The Winds  
north and east  
south and west

**2**

The Elements  
earth and air  
fire and water

**3**

The Seasons  
winter and spring  
summer and fall

**4**

The Oracles  
yarrow and bone  
tortoise and stone

Before the time of the Yellow Emperor, before even the time of Fu Xi, the stones came to this world as the Fourth Oracle. And as would be most appropriate for the fourth stage of the fourth group of the Rule of Four, the stones evolved through four incarnations: first as the *Oracle of the Stones*, next as the *Meditation of the Stones*, then as the *Art of Stones*, and finally as the *Ancient Game of Stones*.



The Fourth Oracle, the *Oracle of the Stones*, came to be known simply as “the stones.” The stones were no ordinary oracle. To consult them one needed only to touch them, to hold them, to be with them, to become one with the colors, shapes, and symbols that formed their lexicon. The stones were experienced by the faithful as a living presence, and when one learned their language they would speak directly — earth’s heart to human heart.

The stones worked by mirroring the magic of the subconscious mind. Thus, they never absolved questioners of the responsibility of selecting their own future, and never could be corrupted into mere fortune-telling tools.

Rather, they pointed attention toward those hidden fears and motivations that, unknown to questioners, were invisibly shaping their future. Once their presence became evident, these unseen factors could then be absorbed by the questioner into the realm of free choice.

Consulted by princes and peasants alike, the stones provided an intuitive, naturally balanced foundation upon which primal civilization could successfully base its survival. They were the voice of the Tao itself: clear, compassionate, unflinchingly direct, and honest. Out of love for the wisdom and beauty of the stones, dedicated believers devoted years, even lifetimes, to elevating their communion with the oracle to perfection.

And for a brilliant, shining moment in time, the earth and all its inhabitants vibrated to a single harmonic chord.



But the music would not last forever. In time there arose a group of clerics who became self-professed experts in the way of stones. They began by teaching the way to others. But, eventually, they turned to charging fees to interpret the stones for those who had neither the patience to consult the stones themselves, nor the realization that the wisdom of the stones could not be transmitted except through direct experience.

The power and influence of these usurpers, who insidiously called themselves the "Masters of the Stones," spread quickly... for they took that which the stones once gave freely to all and claimed it for themselves. Thus the *Oracle of the Stones* became lost to the very ones for whom it had originally been intended.

Humanity, in its vanity, distanced itself from the Way. The ancient harmonies became muted, and the stones came once again to be perceived as inert objects, mere concretions of mineral matter, useful only to prop the corner of a derelict hut, define the boundary of a cooking fire, or clobber a startled pheasant for the evening's meal.

And the era of the *Oracle of the Stones* drew to a close.

*Fei Mi-jai stopped a moment to watch a hummingbird, hovering nearby, extract nectar from a white orchid. As the tiny bird whizzed off, the monk turned his attention back to the sorcerer, and continued with his story.*



Generations after the oracle had been silenced and forgotten, a young man named Shih Tzu came to live alone on Spirit Cloud Mountain. As a youth he had seen the shape of things, and finding little there to interest him, chose to leave the world behind. More than a decade had passed, and now the hermit Shih Tzu was approaching his thirtieth year.

To him the mountains spoke in ways his human counterparts could never hope to match: in breezes commingling with pine cones, in springs gurgling and sparkling as they meandered hither and fro, in lightning sparring with heavenly ramparts in spectacles of awesome power.

One ordinary day — ordinary only in that it was no less extraordinary than all the rest — Shih Tzu sat leaning contentedly against a gnarled and ancient pine. The sound of waterfall was a constant calming music and the cool, pure air had awakened his senses to crystal clarity.

His mind was as empty as the cloudless sky when he noticed a stone beside his sandaled foot. It had a peculiar shape, a distinctive translucent blue color, and a rather remarkable marking across its face. He bent over, picking it up to examine it more closely.

He held it first in one hand, and then the other. He sniffed it, and licked it, then rubbed it across his grizzled cheek — feeling, he thought, a pulse so deep and wondrous that his own heart's rhythms were drawn into step with the cadence. It was alive! He could feel it!

And then he was gone, gone to a place no mortal had ventured before; gone so far he completely lost track of who he was and from where he had come and why he should even be at all.

When he awoke his body was buried in years of leafy droppings fallen from the venerable pine. His beard — extending below his navel — was grayer than it was black. Rising upon the shaky legs of his now gaunt frame, he descended directly from his mountain perch to the valleys below.

And the age of the *Meditation of the Stones* had begun to dawn.

*A sudden "Caw! Caw!" issued from a passing crow, drew Ehsarai's attention for an instant. Then the sorcerer locked eyes with the monk once again, and the storyteller continued.*



Wearing tattered robes and sandals worn bare from walking the dung-covered roads, Shih Tzu wandered from village to village. He had little to say, and so said little. Entering an enclave of peasant hovels, he would search for the corner of the village square left least adorned by the cows and

swine, then sit himself down, arranging his legs in the lotus position.

With great deliberation, and without noticing those who had paused to notice him, he opened his shoulder bag and removed the stone board he carried therein. Then he drew out a cloth pouch containing dozens of similar-sized stones, each varying in shape and color and with a primitive ideogram etched upon its surface.

He would hold the pieces in his hands, fondle them, speak to them, and listen to them as if they were speaking back to him. Then he would place them, one by one, upon the board. A crowd would gather to watch this strange wanderer lost in a world of stones.

When the placing of the stones had drawn to a natural conclusion, Shih Tzu would sigh deeply, close his eyes, and be gone. Gone he would be for hours or days; but when his eyes finally reopened there would always be at least one villager waiting, eyes wide, eager to learn the secret of the stones. Shih Tzu would rise silently and begin walking toward the next village, the supplicants falling in step behind him.

Twenty-two moons after first coming down from Spirit Cloud Mountain, Shih Tzu finally returned to his home, hundreds of truthseekers following reverently in his path.





Sequestered among the spired peaks, the settlement swiftly blossomed beyond primitive huts of piled stone into a temple of truth and hope. As time passed it came to be known as Shih Tao Monastery.

For over two hundred years, life at the mountain retreat reflected the unyielding, compassionate wisdom of the *Meditation of the Stones*. It is said that Shih Tzu lived to be two hundred and sixty-three years old.

One sunrise in the autumn of his final year, Shih Tzu emerged slowly from the humble one-mat cell that had been his home since his return to the mountain. He had grown so frail and evanescent, there now seemed naught but a glow and a whisper to his temporal presence.

He took one step beyond the door frame of his hut when — before thought — his arm extended out in front of him, palm facing skyward. A single flake of snow, floating unseen from the heavens, landed gently upon his open hand. He stood there transfixed, watching as it melted and merged with his flesh. He seemed to hear a message transmitted in the silence of the crystalline teardrop.

Turning, he shuffled slowly toward a group of children gathered about their stone boards, practicing their meditations. The children, feeling the master's presence lift them, merged more deeply with *the one* than ever they had before.

When they returned to the physical plane, Shih Tzu was gone. On the ground where he had stood they found a single blue stone, opalescent, radiant, and pure.

Before long, the mountain's residents began to trickle back down to the valleys. And the trickle became a torrent, until the monastery existed no more. Most took their stones with them. But none could manage to preserve the meditation practice. And the *Meditation of the Stones* quietly disappeared.



The soul of the stones had been left behind, yet their inherent beauty transcended the dark veil...for as with all objects of power and spirit that have fallen into disuse, their essence could still be experienced as a palpable presence. The few stonesets that survived the arduous trek down the mountain were looked upon by the multitudes with wonder and awe, and their impact on the aesthetic consciousness of the people eventually redounded to the farthest corners of the kingdom.

Those who regularly used the stones still experienced the calming influence of the patterns upon the board. In time, it was discovered that different tableaux generated varying effects. Use of the power and beauty of the stones began to permeate through a remarkable array of unlikely mediums. If a simple arrangement of stones could evoke such a feeling of peace and security, how much more the impact if a whole village were geomantically laid out along those same formations?

Farmsteads followed suit, utilizing crops such as rice, wheat, clover, and soy to provide the alternating patterns. Dishes, cups, and bowls were fired as squares so propitious tableaux could be created at the dinner table. Among the literati even a style of poetry, using an aberrant interpretation of the "Rule of Four" as its metric cornerstone, came into wide vogue.

But the most obvious medium for artistic expression of the stones' beauty was the stones themselves. Artists and craftsmen everywhere turned their spirits and talents to creating stonesets of astonishing beauty and grace.

Every manner of stone was put to the artisan's chisel. Stonesets of carnelian, azurite, amber, sodalite, bloodstone, and quartz were crafted and coveted by the burgeoning numbers who peopled the cult of the *Art of Stones*. Perhaps some of the most exquisite and subtle of all the stonesets were carved of wood — for was not wood of the earth itself, issuing as it did from the very womb of stone?

Inevitably, sets came to be made from silver and gold and other precious metals. And soon they became too valuable to exhibit in public for fear they would be stolen. The trade in stones became brisk and unsettling. Wealth, prestige, power, and influence came to be measured by the number and kinds of stones one possessed.

And it came to pass that the stones, once the symbol of an enlightened society principled by beauty, became synonymous with treachery, corruption, and greed.

Thus the *Art of Stones* was reduced to a form of currency, and became lost in a flood of cascading passions.



*Fei Mi-jai paused to sip his tea. Then, hands folded, palms together in his lap, he continued.*

A cloud of dust rising on the horizon had come to signify yet another army on the march, bringing with it another warlord with his horde of looting mercenaries.

In this time of endless war — pitting family against clan, village against town, and dynasty against usurper — the stones took on new significance. For the “Rule of Four” had been perverted into the Ruling Four Deities of War: strategy, intuition, patience, and chance.

Power was no longer a responsibility to be tempered by compassion and wisdom, but a precondition to wealth by plunder. And as everyone knew, the stones meant power.

Playing the stones with discipline still brought the player to “one-pointed mind.” But more than for the calm and focus they bestowed upon the player, the stones were valued for the role they played in summoning the Four Deities to one’s side.

The evening before battle the opposing generals would invariably be found in their respective camps, huddled within their tents and hunched over a board of stones. By playing the stones, the leaders could divine how best to approach the imminent warfare.

For these men, through an unholy convolution of natural law, the stones had become oracle, meditation, art, and game all rolled into one.

The wars raged for centuries and the populace was decimated. Eventually, the only able-bodied men remaining were the warlords and generals. And since they never deigned to participate in the brutality themselves, there was no one left to do battle.

So wars came to be settled over a game of stones. To the winning player went all the spoils — including the other player's ston eset.

*Fei Mi-jai closed his eyes and drew silent. A butterfly flitted about, a bee buzzed past, an invisible breeze rippled through the river reeds. Ehsarai sat patiently, waiting without stirring for the monk to resume his narrative.*



One man emerged preeminent from the wars. He was Wuying Li, and he was a master at the *Ancient Game of Stones*. But he was also greedy and ruthless. He challenged all he met to the stones, and invariably left them beaten, humiliated, and stoneless. By the time of his death he had amassed a sprawling empire and a treasury stocked to bursting. All this he left to his spoiled, insolent son, Wuying Zao.

To Zao, his only heir, Li also bequeathed his awesome proficiency at stones. Zao played at the "eight 4-Way" level, and few were his subjects who could consistently achieve even seven.

When Zao reached maturity he rampaged over the land, and set his acquisitive sights on anything his departed father had been unable to win or steal. Zao's stones collection grew beyond comprehension. After a while he could no longer countenance anyone else even owning a set. He declared illegal the creation of any new stonesets, and went about winning all those that remained.

No one could match Zao's skill at stones. And when the day arrived when no new challengers came to court, Zao's pride grew to titanic proportions — for he believed that every ston eset under heaven was his. And so it seemed.

But rumors came trickling into the capital that one ston eset still remained free of the tyrant's possession. Zao would not — could not — accept this. He plotted to lure the "coward" and his stones from his hiding place.

In his arrogance, Zao announced that he would challenge the set's owner to a match, wagering all the sets in his possession against his opponent's one. The challenge would remain in effect for one hundred days, and then be withdrawn.

Three full moons and one crescent moon later — one hundred days to the hour — a man appeared at the gates to the capitol, stoneboard and pouch in hand. Word spread quickly to the palace.

As the man ascended the palace steps, Zao's heart skipped one tiny beat. But he soon was smiling again. For his opponent was just an old man. And his ston eset — it wasn't platinum, or gold, or ivory, or even wood. It was plain stone.



A roll of exuberant laughter pealed from deep within Zao's considerable gut, and the stench of doom pervaded every corner of the city.



The old stranger was tall and thin with ebony eyes and a long wispy beard. His silvery hair was combed up into a topknot and held there with a single pin. He wore the simple black robe of a Taoist priest.

The stranger drank tea. Zao drank wine. And as was his right as the issuer of the challenge, Zao chose to play first. His style was to break his opponent's spirit with a dazzling display of virtuoso stoneplay.

And dazzle he did. Zao was brilliant. As ordinary as the old man's stoneset was, Zao still lusted after it like a 17-year-old boy during his first night in the brothel. Zao reached the pinnacle of his skills that day, for nothing so moved him as lust combined with greed.

When he was finished, Zao had achieved what no person had ever done before: he had emptied his pouch of all its 72 stones, *and* he had scored an astounding twelve 4-Way matches.

Looking up in glee to give the old man that smug, obnoxious look of feigned pity a supercilious winner casts to a beaten opponent, Zao was just in time to see the monk placing his first stone upon his board.

That was the last fast move the old man made. Lapsing often into deep meditation, caressing and rubbing the stones, talking to them and placing them to his ears, the old man's game stretched through the night.

And as dawn began spreading pastel colors across the morning sky, the black-robed challenger achieved the incredible. With his next-to-last stone he, too, played his twelfth 4-Way match of the game.

Zao scanned the board wildly, his eyes darting everywhere. "Impossible," he screamed, the echo resounding off the palace walls, rudely and repeatedly piercing the aurora stillness.

Indeed, the old man had matched Zao on 4-Ways. But the final stone still remained. If the monk couldn't find a place for it on the board, Zao would win. And even if the old man could place the stone, the game would be a draw and Zao would still be declared winner...for Zao had issued the challenge, and by accepting it the old man had assumed the tacit obligation to better him.

Holding the final stone in both his hands, the old man closed his eyes. He lowered his head and inhaled deeply, heavily. With a slow, deliberate, barely perceptible exhalation his body let go a tiny, prolonged shudder. It appeared as if the last feeble breath had just slipped unwillingly from his frail body. And with it, all hope of victory.

Zao sensed the old man's defeat.

But at the instant the sun's first rays crept above the horizon — casting the priest's shadow the length of the courtyard as it bathed his torso in golden radiance — the old man suddenly raised his head and opened his eyes wide.

They were glowing the color of "rare blue jade."



Zao never recovered from the old man's thirteenth 4-Way.

The old priest claimed Zao's stonesets and had them all destroyed. Then he tucked his own tattered pouch of stones into the sleeve of his robe, placed the board of plain stone beneath his arm, and departed.

He was last seen walking north toward the distant mountains of Han Shan, carrying with him the last existing set of stones.

*Fei Mi-jai finished the story and carefully rolled up the scroll. Then, as the Grand Master had instructed, he handed Ehsarai the set of stones.*

*Both men rose as one and bowed deeply to each other.*

*The monk turned and quickly disappeared upstream into the gathering mist. The sorcerer headed east into the brilliant sunshine — his eyes dazzled by the light, the stones clasped tightly to his breast.*



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