

An Excerpt from THE TAO OF WU by THE RZA
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Introduction: TRAVELS

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

—Lao-Tzu

If you live in the projects, you don't leave them much. Everything is right there: laundry, grocery store, check-cashing place—all set up so you can live your whole life in a four-block radius. I've lived in at least ten different projects in New York—Van Dyke in Brownsville, Marcus Garvey in East New York, Park Hill and Stapleton in Staten Island—and they all taught me something, even if they were lessons no one would choose.

Imagine you're eight years old, going to the store with thirty-five cents to buy a pack of Now and Laters and a bag of sunflower seeds. You get there, three teenagers choke you with an umbrella, take your thirty-five cents, and buy cigarettes. That's the projects—math and economics class on every block. Imagine you live with eighteen relatives in a two-bedroom apartment across the street from the courthouse and county jail. You wonder why the jail and courthouse are so close to the projects; when you get locked up there a few years later, you learn. You learn civics, government, law, and science every day—especially science. Because the projects, like jail, is a science project. One no one expects you to leave.

I did leave—moved out of Stapleton projects at twenty-three, in 1992—and not long after that, my brothers in the Wu-Tang Clan and I became citizens of the world. But those project lessons are still with all of us, one of the foundations for wisdom. They're the darkness that lets us see light.

I'll give you an example.

In 1978, my mother, who worked in a numbers house, hit the number for about four g's—enough money to move eight of us into a three-bedroom place on Dumont Avenue. This was in Marcus Garvey, a violent ghetto, but for a minute there we felt like the white kids on the TV show *Eight Is Enough*: eight kids with toys, bikes, and a new home. But before we could move in, the place was robbed. All our stuff—toys, bikes, furniture—was gone, right before Christmas. We were heartbroken but moved in anyway, and before long I got to know our next-door neighbor, Chili-Wop.

Chili-Wop was the coolest motherfucker you'd ever meet. He was a drug dealer with muscles, gold chains, mad style, and a crazy way of talking. "Whasuuup!" he'd yell. "It's Chili-Waaawp, nigga, whaaaat!" For some reason, Chili-Wop took a liking to me. He started taking me on trips—drug runs, really, although I didn't know it at the time—and began looking out for me. Chili-Wop became an ally, a protector in a violent world. Finally, after I'd lived there for nearly two years, he told me something. "When y'all first moved in, I robbed your house, maaan. I never knew you was gonna be a cool family." When he told me, there wasn't much I could do about it, and by then he was like my best friend—or as they say in the hood nowadays, my big homie—so in a way it was cool.

That's just one hood lesson: Your allies can arrive as enemies, blessings as a curse.

When I was ten, Chili-Wop was sixteen. By the time I was eleven, Chili-Wop's crew was shot up by rival drug dealers, and he ended up in jail. That was life on Dumont Avenue, which I now see for what it was: hell—a hell of violence, addiction, misery, and humiliation. These forces were in even the air and water, in times of heavy rain, human excrement floated by under our basement-level bedroom, where me and my five brothers slept on two twin beds. No one chooses to live like that, but I now see that even that experience—living where shit fl oats—was a source of precious wisdom.

It's like a story from the life of Da'Mo, the Indian monk who brought Zen Buddhism to China. One day, Da'Mo was talking with another monk, who began to denounce mud—saying how dirty it was, how a man should stay clean, keep away from mud. But Da'Mo observed that the lotus grows on mud: "How can you defame mud when such a beautiful flower grows from it?" he asked. Da'Mo's teachings reached everywhere—from the samurai class of Japan to the kung fu monks of Shaolin to the housing projects of Staten Island. I apply Da'Mo's wisdom to the projects. I believe the misery there brought forth a certain flower that wouldn't have grown anywhere else.

I was thirteen years old when I saw the kung-fu film *The Thirty-sixth Chamber of Shaolin*, the story of a man who trains to be a Shaolin monk then leaves the temple to teach the world their style of kung fu. Nine years later, I

formed the Wu-Tang Clan—and we left Staten Island to teach the world our style of hip-hop. Eight years after that, I came to the original Shaolin, saw the real Wu-Tang Mountain—and saw that it was all part of one whole. I saw that we really were what we'd always claimed to be: men of Wu-Tang.

Shaolin is about as far from Staten Island as you can get. It's on Mount Song, the center peak of Taoism's Five Great Mountains in China, a sacred place, high above the banks of the Yellow River. There on the mountain's western edge stands the Shaolin temple: low and sturdy, red walls and round windows, the same courtyard where monks have practiced kung fu ever since Da'Mo visited in the sixth century. Shaolin is seven thousand miles from New York City. Wu-Tang Mountain is even farther. Five thousand feet above sea level, a five-hour bus ride through winding mountain roads, and a home to Taoist monasteries going back fifteen hundred years. But when we stood on this mountain and looked up at the range of peaks called the Nine Dragons, this is what we saw: three mountains forming a giant W—the symbol I chose to represent a crew of nine men, nine years earlier. It was as plain as day, and has been for a million years. But some things aren't visible until you're truly ready to see them.

I stood there with Shi Yan Ming, a man I call Sifu, which means “teacher.” He's a thirty-fourth-generation Shaolin monk who defected to the United States the same year we formed Wu-Tang. As we looked over the mountains, Sifu and I talked about the original Wu-Tang—how it was founded by a monk named Zhang Sanfeng, who had been banished to this mountain for causing violence and doing wrong. Zhang Sanfeng came to the mountain to meditate and find God and eventually founded the Wu-Tang. Our crew had lots of meanings for the words Wu-Tang—“Witty, Unpredictable Talent and Natural Game,” “We Usually Take Another Nigga's Garments”—in China, I learned another, the original one: “Man who is deserving of God.”

So in that sense, we are all Wu-Tang. You are Wu-Tang. If you ever stood on a mountain or by an ocean and felt a deep connection, a vast infinite presence inside you, you felt it: what Taoists call Oneness, Muslims call Allah, others call God. That's what I felt on Wu-Tang Mountain, but it's also what I felt in Staten Island and even Dumont Avenue in Brooklyn—only dimmer, quieter. Allah's truth is within us all, all the time—a seed waiting for light to help it grow. Wisdom is the Light.

This is a book of Wisdom—an accumulation of songs, parables, meditations, and experiences to help manifest that truth in your life. Wisdom is what shows those in darkness the Light, what reveals the path or the Way. It's what we all need to live. The sutras of the Buddha teach that without wisdom there is no gain. In the Bible's Book of Proverbs, King Solomon chooses wisdom over all the other gifts that God offers him—long life, riches, fame—but through wisdom achieved these gifts and many more, including seven hundred wives. In Islam's Divine Mathematics, we learn that Wisdom is the Two after One, which is Knowledge—it is proof of knowledge, reflection of knowledge, knowledge in action. In my life, all these understandings of wisdom have proven true.

Krishna said that you can study all day, pray all day, chant all day, but you'll get to Heaven faster if you hang with wise men. I've been blessed by wise men my whole life—whether it was my cousin GZA, who first taught me Mathematics, my Chinese brother Sifu, who teaches me kung fu, or the philosophy students I met in Athens, the villagers I shared mud huts with in Africa, the audio inventors I worked with in Switzerland, the film directors in Hollywood, the mullahs of Egypt. The kind of artist that I am, I tend to meet people who want to show me something, and I'm always down to learn. In the Wu-Tang Clan, I'm known as the Abbot—which, like Sifu, means “teacher”—but a real teacher is also a student, someone who never stops learning.

The Book of Proverbs says that King Solomon sought wisdom from the cradle to the grave. That's a way of saying he sought rebirth. Just as you must come through a woman's womb to attain physical birth, so must you come through Wisdom to achieve mental birth. And like childbirth, Wisdom often comes with pain. Pain, joy, fear—all have borne in me wisdom, which, like water, is an ever flowing spring from a bottomless ocean, a flow of life that takes the shape of any vessel, that reveals itself in all bodies and all moments. For Wisdom is the Way.

*You've been given the chance to hear the true and living
So do the knowledge, son, before you do the wisdom.*

—RZA, “A Day to God Is 1,000 Years”

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