道德经

Dao De Jing

Attributed to Laozi

The Chinese text with pinyin, a literal English translation and a commentary on each chapter

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Chinese text: the Wang Bi received edition. Translation, commentary and pinyin: dao-de-jing.com.

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道经

The Book of the Way

第一章 Chapter 1

The nameless Way

dào kě dào fēi cháng dào
道可道非常道，

The way that can be followed is not the eternal Way.

míng kě míng fēi chángmíng
名可名非常名。

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

wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ
无名天地之始，

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

yǒu míng wàn wù zhī mǔ
有名万物之母。

The named is the mother of the myriad things.

gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào
故常无欲，以观其妙，

Therefore, ever desireless, one can see the cosmos' mystery,

cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiào
常有欲，以观其徼。

ever desiring, one merely sees its manifestations.

cǐ liǎng zhě tóng chū ér yì míng
此两者同出而异名，

These two concepts have the same origin despite their different names,

tóng wèi zhī xuán xuán zhī yòu xuán
同谓之玄，玄之又玄，

both are considered mysteries, mysteries within mysteries,

zhòng miào zhī mén
众妙之门。

the gateway to all marvels.

Meaning

Chapter 1 sets out the problem the whole book works with: what lies at the origin of things cannot be fully held in words. The opening line plays on 道 (dào), which means a way, and also to tread it or to speak it: a way that can be followed, or told, is not the eternal Way, 常道. The second line does the same with names.

The chapter then pairs the nameless (无名), the beginning of heaven and earth, with the named (有名), the mother of the myriad things. Ever desireless, one sees the mystery of the cosmos; ever desiring, one merely sees its manifestations. The two come from one source and are named apart, and together they are called 玄 (mystery), "mysteries within mysteries", the gateway to all marvels.

The punctuation of lines 3 to 6 is disputed. Some editors break after 无 and 有 and read "absence" and "presence" as the key terms; this site follows Wang Bi and reads 无名 and 有名, then 常无欲 and 常有欲. The nameless returns in chapter 25, and the mother in chapter 52.

第二章 Chapter 2

Opposites define each other

tiān xià jiē zhī měi zhī wéi měi sī è yǐ
天下皆知美之为美，斯恶已，

People on Earth have defined beautiful as beautiful, and thus there is ugliness.

jiē zhī shàn zhī wéi shàn sī bù shàn yǐ
皆知善之为善，斯不善已。

They have defined the good as good, and thus there is what is not good.

gù yǒu wú xiāngshēng nán yì xiāngchéng
故有无相生，难易相成，

Therefore presence and absence produce each other. Difficulty and ease bring about each other.

chángduǎn xiāng jiào gāo xià xiāng qīng
长短相较，高下相倾，

Long and short delimit each other. High and low contrast with each other.

yīn shēngxiāng hè qián hòu xiāng suí
音声相和，前后相随。

Sound and noise harmonize each other. Front and back follow each other.

shì yǐ shèng rén chǔ wú wéi zhī shì
是以圣人处无为之事，

Thus the sage puts himself in a position of non-active productive state,

xíng bù yán zhī jiào　　wàn wù zuò yān ér bù cí
行不言之教，万物作焉而不辞，

carries out unspoken guidance. The myriad things conform to the same law, without a word.

shēng ér bù yǒu　　wéi ér bù shì
生而不有，为而不恃，

Living without possessing, acting without expectations,

gōngchéng ér fú jū　　fú wéi fú jū
功成而弗居。夫唯弗居，

succeeding without taking credit. Precisely because he does not take credit,

shì yǐ bù qù
是以不去。

so that credit never leaves him.

Meaning

Chapter 2 starts from how people name things: once people on Earth define beauty as beauty, there is ugliness, and once they define the good as good, there is what is not good. Each quality is known only against its opposite. The chapter then lists six pairs, presence and absence, difficult and easy, long and short, high and low, sound and noise, front and back, which produce, complete and follow one another.

From this the sage draws a way of acting. He puts himself in a state of 无为 (non-action) and carries out unspoken guidance, and the myriad things conform to the same law without a word. He lives without possessing, acts without expectations, and succeeds without taking credit. Because he does not take credit, credit never leaves him.

The phrase 不辞 in line 7 is read either as "does not speak of it", as the house translation does ("without a word"), or as "does not turn away from them"; the

word gloss gives both. The closing lines return almost word for word in chapters 10 and 51, and the pair of presence and absence in chapter 11.

第三章 Chapter 3

Not adulating the worthy

bù shàng xián shǐ mín bù zhēng
不尚贤，使民不争，

Not adulating the worthy makes people non-contentious.

bù guì nán dé zhī huò shǐ mín bù wéi dào
不贵难得之货，使民不为盗。

not valuing hard-to-get goods makes people refrain from stealing.

bù xiàn kě yù shǐ mín xīn bù luàn
不见可欲，使民心不乱。

Not displaying what can be desired keeps people's hearts calm.

shì yǐ shèng rén zhī zhì
是以圣人之治，

Thus the sage governs:

xū qí xīn shí qí fù ruò qí zhì qiáng qí gǔ
虚其心，实其腹，弱其志，强其骨。

clear people's minds, fill their bellies, weaken their ambitions and strengthen their bones.

cháng shǐ mín wú zhī wú yù shǐ fú zhì zhě bù gǎn wéi yě
常使民无知无欲，使夫智者不敢为也，

Always keep the people without knowledge and without desire, and make the clever ones not dare to act.

wéi wú wéi zé wú bù zhì
为无为，则无不治。

Act without acting, and nothing will be out of order.

Meaning

Chapter 3 is about government and reads as advice to a ruler. If the worthy are not exalted, people do not compete; if rare goods are not prized, they do not steal; if nothing desirable is put on show, their hearts are not troubled. The causes of disorder are placed in what the ruler chooses to honor.

The sage governs by clearing minds and filling bellies, weakening ambitions and strengthening bones. Keeping the people "without knowledge and without desire" can sound harsh to a modern reader. This site reads 知 here as scheming cleverness, the kind that sets people competing; Wang Bi explains the line as keeping the people genuine. The next clause says the clever do not dare to act. The chapter closes on 为无为, acting through non-action: then nothing is out of order.

The hard-to-get goods return in chapter 12, and the call to give up cleverness and profit in chapter 19. Chapter 65 takes up again the idea of a people kept simple.

第四章 Chapter 4

The empty vessel

dào chōng ér yòng zhī huò bù yíng
道冲而用之或不盈，

The Way is empty, yet used, it never fills up.

yuān xī sì wàn wù zhī zōng
渊兮似万物之宗。

So deep as to be the ancestor of the myriad things.

cuò qí ruì jiě qí fēn
挫其锐，解其纷，

It blunts sharpness, untangles knots,

hé qí guāng tóng qí chén
和其光，同其尘。

softens the glare, combines the elements.

zhàn xī sì huò cún
湛兮似或存，

So profound as to possibly have a remainder.

wú bù zhī shéi zhī zǐ
吾不知谁之子，

I do not know what it is,

xiàng dì zhī xiān
象帝之先。

it appeared before God.

Meaning

In chapter 4 the Way is an empty vessel. 冲 is read here as an empty bowl: it can be used and never needs filling, and it never runs out. Deep as an abyss, it seems

to be the ancestor of the myriad things.

The middle lines say what it does: it blunts sharpness, untangles knots, softens the glare and combines the elements. The same four phrases appear again in chapter 56, where they describe the person who has found the Way. Then the tone turns uncertain: it is so profound that something of it may remain, and the speaker does not know what it is.

The last line, 象帝之先, says the Way appeared before 帝, rendered "God": the Lord on High, the supreme deity of ancient China, whom Wang Bi explains as the Lord of heaven. The idea of a fullness that seems empty and is never used up returns in chapter 45.

第五章 Chapter 5

The bellows

tiān dì bù rén yǐ wàn wù wéi chú gǒu
天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；

Heaven and earth are inhumane, they treat all things like ritual dolls.

shèng rén bù rén yǐ bǎi xìng wéi chú gǒu
圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。

The sage is inhumane, he treats the people like ritual dolls.

tiān dì zhī jiān qí yóu tuó yuè hū
天地之间，其犹橐籥乎？

Space in the cosmos, is it just like bellows?

xū ér bù qū dòng ér yù chū
虚而不屈，动而愈出。

Empty yet never exhausted, the more it moves, the more comes out.

duō yán shuò qióng bù rú shǒu zhōng
多言数穷，不如守中。

Describing its extremes leads to exhaustion, and is inferior to holding the center (not naming).

Meaning

In chapter 5, heaven and earth, and the sage who takes them as his model, are inhumane: they do not act out of 仁 (humaneness). They treat all things, and the sage treats the people, like ritual dolls, the straw dogs (刍狗) that were honored during a sacrifice and thrown away after it. Nothing is singled out for favor.

The second image makes the space in the cosmos a bellows. It is empty yet never runs out, and the more it moves, the more comes out. Emptiness is again the source of use, as with the vessel of chapter 4. The chapter ends on speech:

describing its extremes leads to exhaustion, and it is better to hold the center without naming it.

Ritual straw dogs are the reading most commentators follow, and this site with them. Wang Bi took the two words apart: heaven and earth do not grow grass (刍) for beasts, yet beasts eat grass, nor breed dogs (狗) for people, yet people eat dogs. Either way, things are left to themselves. Speaking little returns in chapter 23.

第六章 Chapter 6

The spirit of abundance

gǔ shén bù sǐ
谷神不死，

The spirit of abundance never dies,

shì wèi xuán pìn
是谓玄牝，

it is called the mystic female,

xuán pìn zhī mén
玄牝之门，

the opening of the mystic female,

shì wèi tiān dì gēn
是谓天地根。

is called the root of heaven and earth.

mián mián ruò cún
绵绵若存，

It infinitely seems to exist,

yòng zhī bù qín
用之不勤。

use it, it is never exhausted.

Meaning

Chapter 6 gives the Way two images: the spirit of abundance, which does not die, and 玄牝 (the mysterious female). 谷 is a valley, empty and low, where water and life gather; the female gives birth. The gate of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.

The chapter is short and rhythmic, almost a chant. Its last two lines describe something unbroken: it seems to exist without end, and using it never wears it out. 勤 here does not mean "diligent", as it does today, but "to wear out".

谷神, literally the valley spirit, has been read in many ways. Heshang Gong took 谷 as "to nourish", nourishing the spirit so as not to die, and the house translation follows that sense: the spirit of abundance. Wang Bi explains it as the empty center of the valley, an image of the Way's emptiness rather than a deity; here the site departs from Wang Bi. The female returns in chapter 10, and the valley in chapters 15 and 28.

第七章 Chapter 7

Last, and so first

tiān cháng dì jiǔ
天长地久。

The cosmos is infinite and timeless.

tiān dì suǒ yǐ néngcháng qiě jiǔ zhě
天地所以能长且久者，

The reason heaven and earth can last so long

yǐ qí bù zì shēng
以其不自生，

Is that they do not foster themselves.

gù néngchángshēng
故能长生。

Thus they can live long.

shì yǐ shèng rén hòu qí shēn ér shēn xiān
是以圣人后其身而身先，

The sage puts himself last, and thus is first,

wài qí shēn ér shēn cún
外其身而身存。

he detaches himself, and thus endures.

fēi yǐ qí wú sī yé
非以其无私邪？

Is he not selfless?

gù néngchéng qí sī
故能成其私。

This is precisely the cause of his fulfillment.

Meaning

Chapter 7 draws a lesson for the sage from the long life of heaven and earth. They last because they do not live for themselves (不自生). Wang Bi explains that what lives for itself competes with other things, while what does not live for itself is something all things come back to.

The sage does the same. He puts himself last, and thus is first; he detaches himself, and thus endures. The chapter ends with a question that is also an answer: is it not because he has no self-interest that he can fulfill himself?

The ending can sound like a calculation, as if selflessness were only a clever means to gain. The text does not settle this, and readers differ: the paradox is stated, not resolved. Putting oneself last returns in chapter 66, where the sage stays behind the people in order to lead them, and the wholeness of one who does not push himself forward in chapter 22.

第八章 Chapter 8

Like water

shàng shàn ruò shuǐ
上善若水。

The highest good is like water.

shuǐ shàn lì wàn wù ér bù zhēng
水善利万物而不争，

Water benefits all things without struggle,

chǔ zhòng rén zhī suǒ wù
处众人之所恶，

it goes to places that everyone abhors,

gù jī yú dào
故几于道。

thus is almost like the Way.

jū shàn dì　　xīn shàn yuān
居善地，心善渊，

In dwelling, good at choosing the ground; in the mind, good at depth;

yǔ shàn rén　　yán shàn xìn
与善仁，言善信，

in giving, good at humaneness; in speech, good at trust;

zhèng shàn zhì　　shì shàn néng
正善治，事善能，

in governing, good at order; in work, good at ability;

dòng shàn shí　　fú wéi bù zhēng
动善时。夫唯不争，

in movement, good at timing. Precisely because it does not contend,

gù wú yóu
故无尤。

it is beyond reproach.

Meaning

Chapter 8 compares 上善 (the highest good) to water. Water benefits the myriad things without contending, and it settles in the low places everyone else avoids. That is why it is close to the Way.

Seven short phrases follow, each joining an area of life to 善, being good at something: in dwelling, the ground; in the heart, depth; in dealing with others, humaneness; in speech, trust; in governing (正, standing for 政), order; in work, ability; in action, timing. The list is often read as water's qualities carried over to a person, though the chapter does not say so, and the phrases are construed in more than one way; this site reads 善 in each as "good at".

The last line gives the reason: only because it does not contend, 不争, does it incur no blame. 不争 is one of the book's recurring conclusions, in chapters 22, 66 and 81 as well. Water returns in chapter 78: nothing is softer, yet nothing does better against the hard.

第九章 Chapter 9

Knowing when to stop

chí ér yíng zhī
持而盈之，

Persisting in fulfilling it,

bù rú qí yǐ
不如其已。

is inferior to stopping in time.

zhuī ér ruì zhī
揣而锐之，

Protecting and sharpening it,

bù kě cháng bǎo
不可长保。

cannot be preserved forever.

jīn yù mǎn táng
金玉满堂，

Treasure-filled halls,

mò zhī néng shǒu
莫之能守。

cannot be defended.

fù guì ér jiāo
富贵而骄，

Wealth and pride,

zì yí qí jiù
自遗其咎。

lead to self-loss and bad fortune.

gōng suì shēn tuì
功遂身退，

Accomplish and retire,

tiān zhī dào
天之道。

the Way of heaven.

Meaning

Chapter 9 gives four pictures of excess: persisting in filling something, protecting and sharpening it, treasure-filled halls that cannot be defended, and wealth and pride that lead to self-loss and bad fortune.

Each picture shows something pushed past its point, so that it turns against its owner. The first lines, 持而盈之 and 揣而锐之, are very compressed in the Chinese and name no object; a vessel filled to the brim and a blade sharpened too far are one common way of reading them. The chapter ends with its rule: when the work is done, withdraw. That is the Way of heaven, 天之道.

The advice is not to do nothing, but not to cling to what has been done, as the sage of chapter 2 does not dwell on his work. Chapter 44 makes a similar point: knowing what is enough brings no disgrace, knowing when to stop brings no danger, and one can last long.

第十章 Chapter 10

Uniting soul and body

zài yíng pò bào yī
载营魄抱一，

Manage to unite your soul and body,

néng wú lí hū
能无离乎？

can they avoid separation?

zhuān qì zhì róu
专气致柔，

Make your breathing soft,

néng yīng ér hū
能婴儿乎？

can that make you a newborn child?

dí chú xuán lǎn
涤除玄览，

Cleanse your dark thoughts,

néng wú cī hū
能无疵乎？

can it make you flawless?

ài mín zhì guó
爱民治国，

Love people and govern your country,

néng wú zhī hū
能无知乎？

can you avoid over-manipulation?

tiān mén kāi hé
天门开阖，

As the mysterious gate opens and closes,

néng wú cí hū
能无雌乎？

can you be impassive?

míng bái sì dá
明白四达，

As your understanding reaches everywhere,

néng wú wéi hū
能无为乎？

can you refrain from striving?

shēng zhī xù zhī
生之，畜之，

Create it, foster it,

shēng ér bù yǒu
生而不有，

live without possessing,

wéi ér bù shì
为而不恃，

act without expecting,

zhǎng ér bù zǎi
长而不宰，

lead without domineering,

shì wèi xuán dé
是谓玄德。

this is called the mysterious virtue.

Meaning

Chapter 10 is a series of six questions, each asking whether one can do something hard: unite soul and body without their separating; make the breath soft, like a newborn's; cleanse one's dark thoughts until one is flawless; love the people and govern the country without over-manipulation; stay impassive as the mysterious gate opens and closes; let understanding reach everywhere and still refrain from striving.

The questions move from the person to the state and back, as if self-cultivation and government were one practice. The closing lines describe 玄德 (mysterious virtue): living without possessing, acting without expecting, leading without domineering.

Several lines are hard. 营魄 is read, after Heshang Gong, as the two souls of a person. In line 10 the recited text says 能无雌乎, "can you be without the female?", but Wang Bi's own text, like the silk manuscripts and Heshang Gong, has 能为雌乎, "can you be the female?", which his comment explains as responding without leading; the house translation gives that sense: "can you be impassive?" The closing lines repeat chapter 2, and the newborn returns in chapter 55.

第十一章 Chapter 11

The use of emptiness

sān shí fú gòng yī gǔ
三十辐共一毂，

Thirty spokes join at the axis,

dāng qí wú
当其无，

the empty space in between them,

yǒu chē zhī yòng
有车之用。

makes the cart practical.

shān zhí yǐ wéi qì
埏埴以为器，

Mold some clay to make a pot,

dāng qí wú
当其无，

its emptiness within,

yǒu qì zhī yòng
有器之用。

makes the pot usable.

záo hù yǒu yǐ wéi shì
凿户牖以为室，

Cut a door and windows to create a room,

dāng qí wú， yǒu shì zhī yòng
当其无，有室之用。

its emptiness within, makes the room useful.

gù yǒu zhī yǐ wéi lì
故有之以为利，

Therefore, presence brings benefits,

wú zhī yǐ wéi yòng
无之以为用。

absence brings utility.

Meaning

Chapter 11 shows, with three everyday objects, that what is absent is what makes a thing useful. Thirty spokes join at the axis, and it is the empty space between them that makes the cart practical. Clay is shaped into a pot, and the space inside is what holds. Doors and windows are cut into walls, and the empty room is what one lives in.

The final pair states the principle: 有 (presence) brings benefits, 无 (absence) brings utility. The walls, the clay and the wheel are needed; the chapter does not say that only emptiness matters. It says the two work together, and that the part people overlook is the part that does the work.

毂 is the hub, the hole at the center through which the axle passes, here called the axis. Wang Bi says that the hub can hold thirty spokes together precisely because it is empty. The pairing of presence and absence comes from chapter 2 and returns in chapter 40, where the myriad things are born from presence, and presence from absence.

第十二章 Chapter 12

Too many colors

wǔ sè lìng rén mù máng
五色令人目盲，

Too many colors render people blind,

wǔ yīn lìng rén ěr lóng
五音令人耳聋，

too many sounds render people deaf,

wǔ wèi lìng rén kǒu shuǎng
五味令人口爽，

too many flavors dull the palate,

chí chěng tián liè lìng rén xīn fā kuáng
驰骋畋猎令人心发狂，

racing and hunting madden the mind,

nán dé zhī huò lìng rén xíng fáng
难得之货令人行妨。

hard-to-get goods make people misbehave.

shì yǐ shèng rén wèi fù bù wèi mù
是以圣人为腹不为目，

Therefore the sage provides for the soul, not for the senses.

gù qù bǐ qǔ cǐ
故去彼取此。

Thus he lets go of that, and takes up this.

Meaning

Chapter 12 is a warning about overstimulation. Too many colors blind, too many sounds deafen, too many flavors dull the palate; racing and hunting madden the

mind, and hard-to-get goods make people misbehave. The Chinese says the five colors, tones and flavors, the standard lists of the time: the senses are pictured as swamped by everything offered to them.

The sage's answer is in line 6: he provides for the soul, not for the senses. The Chinese says the belly, 腹, and the eye, 目: the belly stands for what actually sustains a person, the eye for what draws one outward toward display and want. Wang Bi puts it this way: one who lives for the belly is nourished by things, one who lives for the eye is made their servant.

The chapter ends with a formula that recurs in chapters 38 and 72: let go of that, take up this. The hard-to-get goods are those of chapter 3, where the sage also fills bellies and clears minds.

第十三章 Chapter 13

Favor and disgrace

chǒng rǔ ruò jīng
宠辱若惊，

Favor and disgrace are alike alarming,

guì dà huàn ruò shēn
贵大患若身。

value great trouble as your own self.

hé wèi chǒng rǔ ruò jīng
何谓宠辱若惊？

What do I mean by "Favor and disgrace are alike alarming"?

chǒng wéi xià dé zhī ruò jīng
宠为下，得之若惊，

Favor is lowly: gaining it is alarming,

shī zhī ruò jīng
失之若惊，

and so is losing it,

shì wèi chǒng rǔ ruò jīng
是谓宠辱若惊。

thus, I say "Favor and disgrace are alike alarming".

hé wèi guì dà huàn ruò shēn
何谓贵大患若身？

What do I mean by "Value great trouble as your own self"?

wú suǒ yǐ yǒu dà huàn zhě
吾所以有大患者，

The reason I have great trouble

wèi wú yǒu shēn　　jí wú wú shēn，
为吾有身，及吾无身，

Is that I have a body; if I had no body,

wú yǒu hé huàn
吾有何患！

what trouble could I have!

gù guì yǐ shēn wéi tiān xià
故贵以身为天下，

Consequently, one who values his body as he values the world

ruò kě jì tiān xià；
若可寄天下；

Can be trusted with the world;

ài yǐ shēn wéi tiān xià，
爱以身为天下，

one who loves his body as he loves the world

ruò kě tuō tiān xià。
若可托天下。

Can be given charge of the world.

Meaning

Chapter 13 asks why favor and disgrace both unsettle people, and it is one of the harder chapters to construe. It opens with two sayings, 宠辱若惊, favor and disgrace are alike alarming, and 贵大患若身, "value great trouble as your own self", then explains each in turn.

Favor is called something low: gaining it brings alarm, and so does losing it. Great trouble comes from having a body, a self to protect: if I had no body, what trouble could I have? The point is not to despise oneself, but to see that worry follows from attachment to the self.

The last four lines are read in different ways. This site follows the reading given in its summary: one who values his body as he values the world can be trusted with the world, and one who loves his body as he loves the world can be given charge of it. Wang Bi comments that one who would not trade his own person for anything can be trusted with the world. The weighing of self against possessions returns in chapter 44, and the ruler who treats the world lightly in chapter 26.

第十四章 Chapter 14

What cannot be seen

shì zhī bù jiàn míng yuē yí
视之不见，名曰夷，

Look for it, it cannot be seen. It is called the distant.

tīng zhī bù wén míng yuē xī
听之不闻，名曰希，

Listen for it, it cannot be heard. It is called the rare.

bó zhī bù dé míng yuē wēi
搏之不得，名曰微。

Reach for it, it cannot be gotten. It is called the subtle.

cǐ sān zhě bù kě zhì jié gù hùn ér wéi yī
此三者不可致诘，故混而为一。

These three ultimately cannot be fathomed. Therefore they join to become one.

qí shàng bù jiǎo qí xià bù mèi
其上不皦，其下不昧。

Its top is not bright; its bottom is not dark.

shéngshéng bù kě míng fù guī yú wú wù
绳绳不可名，复归于无物，

Existing continuously, it cannot be named and it returns to no-thingness.

shì wèi wú zhuàng zhī zhuàng wú wù zhī xiàng
是谓无状之状，无物之象。

Thus, it is called the formless form, The image of no-thing.

shì wèi hū huǎng
是谓惚恍。

This is called the indistinct.

yíng zhī bù jiàn qí shǒu suí zhī bù jiàn qí hòu
迎之不见其首，随之不见其后。

Go to meet it, you cannot see its face. Follow it, you cannot see its back.

zhí gǔ zhī dào yǐ yù jīn zhī yǒu
执古之道，以御今之有，

By holding to the ancient Way, you can protect yourself from present confusion.

néng zhī gǔ shǐ shì wèi dào jì
能知古始，是谓道纪。

And know the primordial beginning. This is called the very beginning thread of the Way.

Meaning

Chapter 14 approaches the Way through what the senses cannot do with it. Looked at, it is not seen; listened for, it is not heard; reached for, it is not grasped. The three names this gives it, 夷, 希 and 微, the distant, the rare and the subtle, cannot be examined one by one, so they join to become one.

The chapter piles up negative descriptions: above it is not bright, below it is not dark; it goes on without end, cannot be named, and returns to no-thingness. It is the formless form, the image of no-thing, the indistinct (惚恍). Met head-on, it shows no face; followed, it shows no back.

The close turns from description to use: by holding to the ancient Way one is protected from present confusion and knows the primordial beginning; this is called the very beginning thread of the Way (道纪). The silk manuscripts found at Mawangdui read 执今之道, the Way of today, where Wang Bi's text has 执古之道; this site keeps Wang Bi's. The indistinct returns in chapter 21, and the Way that cannot be seen or heard in chapter 35.

第十五章 Chapter 15

The ancient masters

gǔ zhī shàn wéi shì zhě, wēi miào xuán tōng, shēn bù kě shí。
古之善为士者，微妙玄通，深不可识。

The ancient masters of the Way had subtle marvelous mystic penetration; a depth that cannot be known.

fú wéi bù kě shí, gù qiǎng wéi zhī róng。
夫唯不可识，故强为之容。

Precisely because they cannot be known, I am forced to describe their appearance.

yù xī ruò dōng shè chuān,
豫兮若冬涉川，

Apprehend it akin to wade across a river in the winter.

yóu xī ruò wèi sì lín,
犹兮若畏四邻，

Just like one afraid of his neighbors on all sides.

yǎn xī qí ruò róng,
俨兮其若容，

Respectful, toward its outer appearance.

huàn xī ruò bīng zhī jiāng shì,
涣兮若冰之将释，

Like ice, ever melting away before revealing itself.

dūn xī qí ruò pǔ,
敦兮其若朴，

Considerate toward its simplicity.

kuàng xī qí ruò gǔ hùn xī qí ruò zhuó
旷兮其若谷，混兮其若浊。

Open, like a valley. Obscure, like muddy water.

shú néng zhuó yǐ jìng zhī xú qīng
孰能浊以静之徐清？

Who can be muddled, and use clarity to gradually become lucid?

shú néng ān yǐ jiǔ dòng zhī xú shēng
孰能安以久动之徐生？

Who can be calm, and use constant application for eventual success?

bǎo cǐ dào zhě bù yù yíng
保此道者不欲盈，

The one who holds to this Way does not crave fulfillment.

fú wéi bù yíng gù néng bì bù xīn chéng
夫唯不盈，故能蔽不新成。

Precisely because he does not crave fulfillment, can he preserve himself and avoid the lure of new accomplishment.

Meaning

Chapter 15 turns to the masters of old who were good at the Way. They were too deep to be known, so the speaker can only try to describe how they appeared. Seven images follow: apprehension, as when wading across a river in winter; fear, just like one afraid of his neighbors on all sides; respect for outer appearance; ice ever melting away before revealing itself; consideration for simplicity, 朴 (the uncarved block); openness, like a valley; obscurity, like muddy water.

Two questions follow. Who can be muddled and, through clarity, gradually become lucid? Who can be calm and, through constant application, succeed in the end? The chapter ends with those who keep this Way: they do not seek to be full, and because they are not full, they can preserve themselves and avoid the lure of new accomplishment.

Several words are uncertain. In line 1 Wang Bi's text reads 士, an officer or scholar, where the silk manuscripts read 道, which is why the house English says "masters of the Way". In line 5 many editions read 客, a guest, for Wang Bi's 容, appearance; the house translation keeps 容. 蔽 in the last line, to cover, is read here as preserving oneself; many editors read it as 敝, worn. The uncarved block returns in chapters 19 and 28.

第十六章 Chapter 16

Returning to the root

zhì xū jí shǒu jìng dǔ
致虚极，守静笃，

To reach extreme vacuity, preserve stillness earnestly.

wàn wù bìng zuò wú yǐ guān fù
万物并作，吾以观复。

The myriad things act in concert, I therefore watch their return.

fú wù yún yún gè fù guī qí gēn
夫物芸芸，各复归其根。

Of all things diverse and varied, each returns to its root.

guī gēn yuē jìng shì wèi fù mìng
归根曰静，是谓复命。

Returning to the root is called quietude. Quietude is called returning to life.

fù mìng yuē cháng zhī cháng yuē míng
复命曰常，知常曰明，

Returning to life is called constant. Knowing this constant is called brilliance.

bù zhī cháng wàng zuò xiōng
不知常，妄作，凶。

Not knowing the constant, acting arbitrarily, is harmful.

zhī cháng róng róng nǎi gōng
知常容，容乃公，

Knowing the constant is receptivity, which is impartial.

gōng nǎi wáng　　wáng nǎi tiān
公乃王，　王乃天，

Impartiality is kingship. Kingship is the universe.

tiān nǎi dào　　dào nǎi jiǔ
天乃道，　道乃久，

The universe is the Way, the Way is eternal.

mò shēn bù dài
没身不殆。

To the end of his life, he is without danger.

Meaning

Chapter 16 is about returning. It begins with a practice: reach extreme vacuity, preserve stillness earnestly. Then it says what can be seen from there: the myriad things act in concert, and the speaker watches them return. However many they are, each goes back to its root.

The chapter then builds a chain, each term leading to the next. Returning to the root is quietude; quietude is called 复命, a return to one's nature, rendered "returning to life"; that is the constant; knowing 常 (the constant) is brilliance. Not knowing it, one acts arbitrarily and comes to harm. Knowing it, one takes everything in; taking everything in, one is impartial; impartial, kingly; kingship is the universe (天), and the universe is the Way; the Way is eternal, so to the end of one's life there is no danger.

复命 here does not mean the modern "report back". In line 8 the received Wang Bi text reads 王, kingly, as do the silk manuscripts and Heshang Gong, and the site keeps it; some editors read 全, complete, because Wang Bi's comment, "reaching everywhere", fits that word, and one printing of his text has it. Returning is the movement of the Way in chapter 40, and knowing the constant as brilliance comes back in chapter 55.

第十七章 Chapter 17

The great masters

tài shàng xià zhī yǒu zhī
太上，下知有之。

The great masters: those below only know they exist.

qí cì qīn ér yù zhī
其次，亲而誉之。

The next are loved and praised.

qí cì wèi zhī
其次，畏之。

The next are feared.

qí cì wǔ zhī
其次，侮之。

The next are despised.

xìn bù zú yān yǒu bù xìn yān
信不足焉，有不信焉。

Where trust is insufficient, there is distrust.

yōu xī qí guì yán
悠兮其贵言。

Unhurried, he is sparing with his words.

gōng chéng shì suì
功成事遂，

Deed accomplished and task successful,

bǎi xìng jiē wèi wǒ zì rán
百姓皆谓我自然。

the people all say: "It happened of itself."

Meaning

Chapter 17 judges leaders by how the people see them, from the best to the worst. Of the great masters, those below only know that they exist. Next come those who are loved and praised, then those who are feared, then those who are despised. The order runs against expectation: being loved ranks below being barely noticed.

The chapter gives a reason: where trust is insufficient, there is distrust. The great master is unhurried and sparing with his words, so that when the deed is accomplished and the task successful, the people all say it was 自然, so of itself. No one is credited, because the master's part never showed.

Some editions read 不知有之, "those below do not know they exist", in line 1; this site follows Wang Bi's 下知有之. The last line is also read in more than one way; this site takes it as the people saying that it all happened of itself. The line on trust returns in chapter 23, and the people who transform of themselves in chapter 57.

第十八章 Chapter 18

When the great Way perishes

dà dào fèi yǒu rén yì
大道废，有仁义；

When the great Way perishes, appear humaneness and justice.

zhì huì chū yǒu dà wěi
智慧出，有大伪；

When intelligence is manifest, arises great deception.

liù qīn bù hé yǒu xiào cí
六亲不和，有孝慈；

When the six family relationships are not in harmony, emerge filial piety and compassion.

guó jiā hūn luàn yǒu zhōng chén
国家昏乱，有忠臣。

When the country is in chaos, stand out loyal ministers.

Meaning

Chapter 18 asks where the virtues people honor come from, and finds each one born of a failure. When the great Way perishes, 仁义 (humaneness and justice) appear; when intelligence is manifest, great deception arises; when the six family relationships are not in harmony, filial piety and compassion emerge; when the country is in chaos, loyal ministers stand out.

The structure is the same four times: a loss, then a remedy that is honored as a virtue. The chapter does not call these virtues bad. It treats them as signs of a lack, as loyalty only stands out where disloyalty is common. Humaneness and justice were central virtues for the followers of Confucius, and the chapter is often read as a reply to them, though no school is named.

The bamboo manuscripts found at Guodian do not have the line on intelligence and deception; Wang Bi's text has it, and so does this site. Chapter 19 draws the

conclusion, telling the ruler to get rid of humaneness and abandon justice, and chapter 38 traces a similar decline from the Way to virtue, humaneness, justice and ritual.

第十九章 Chapter 19

Simplicity and few desires

jué shèng qì zhì mín lì bǎi bèi
绝圣弃智，民利百倍；

Reject the divine and abandon wisdom, the people will benefit a hundredfold.

jué rén qì yì mín fù xiào cí
绝仁弃义，民复孝慈；

Get rid of humaneness and abandon justice, the people will return to filial piety and compassion.

jué qiǎo qì lì dào zéi wú yǒu
绝巧弃利，盗贼无有。

Get rid of cleverness and abandon profit, thieves and gangsters will not exist.

cǐ sān zhě yǐ wéi wén bù zú
此三者，以为文不足，

These above three, are insufficiently described by mere words,

gù lìng yǒu suǒ zhǔ
故令有所属，

therefore let people have something to hold on to:

jiàn sù bào pǔ
见素抱朴，

look at the essence and embrace simplicity.

shǎo sī guǎ yù
少私寡欲。

Lessen selfishness and reduce desire.

Meaning

Chapter 19 draws the practical conclusion of chapter 18: give up what is praised, and the people will be better off. Reject the divine and abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit a hundredfold; get rid of humaneness and abandon justice, and they will return to filial piety and compassion; get rid of cleverness and abandon profit, and thieves and gangsters will not exist.

The chapter then admits that these three are insufficiently described by mere words: people need something to hold on to. What it offers is short: look at the essence and embrace simplicity, 朴 (the uncarved block), lessen selfishness and reduce desire. 素, undyed silk, and 朴, uncarved wood, are both materials before they are worked: the essence of a thing, and its simplicity.

圣 in line 1 is not the sage of the book but holiness held up as a public ideal: the divine. The bamboo manuscripts from Guodian have different pairs here, giving up knowledge and argument, and giving up artifice, with no attack on humaneness and justice, and scholars debate what this shows. This site follows Wang Bi's received text. The uncarved block returns in chapters 28 and 32.

第二十章 Chapter 20

Standing apart

jué xué wú yōu
绝学无忧。

Get rid of "learning" and there will be no anxiety.

wěi zhī yǔ ē xiāng qù jǐ hé
唯之与阿，相去几何？

Between a polite yes and a curt yes, how great is the difference?

shàn zhī yǔ è xiāng qù ruò hé
善之与恶，相去若何？

How far removed from each other are "good" and "evil"?

rén zhī suǒ wèi bù kě bù wèi
人之所畏，不可不畏。

What the people fear, one cannot but fear.

huāng xī qí wèi yāng zāi
荒兮其未央哉！

I am scattered, never having been in a comfortable center.

zhòng rén xī xī rú xiǎng tài láo
众人熙熙，如享太牢，

All the people are bustling about, as if they enjoy the sacrifice,

rú chūn dēng tái
如春登台。

enjoy climbing the Spring Altar.

wǒ dú bó xī qí wèi zhào
我独泊兮其未兆，

I remain alone, not yet having revealed myself.

rú yīng ér zhī wèi hái
如婴儿之未孩。

Like an infant who has not yet laughed.

lěi lěi xī ruò wú suǒ guī
儽儽兮若无所归。

Weary, like one despairing of nowhere to return to.

zhòng rén jiē yǒu yú
众人皆有余，

All the people possess surplus,

ér wǒ dú ruò yí
而我独若遗。

while I alone seem left behind.

wǒ yú rén zhī xīn yě zāi！
我愚人之心也哉！

Mine is the mind of a fool!

dùn dùn xī！
沌沌兮！

So confused!

sú rén zhāo zhāo　wǒ dú hūn hūn；
俗人昭昭，我独昏昏；

Average people are clear-minded, I am alone and muddle-headed.

sú rén chá chá　wǒ dú mèn mèn。
俗人察察，我独闷闷。

Average people know everything. I am alone and depressed.

dàn xī qí ruò hǎi，
澹兮其若海，

Tranquil like the ocean,

liáo xī ruò wú zhǐ
飂兮若无止。

high winds that never stop.

zhòng rén jiē yǒu yǐ　　ér wǒ dú wán sì bǐ
众人皆有以，而我独顽似鄙。

Everyone has a purpose, whereas I am alone, stubborn as a scoundrel.

wǒ dú yì yú rén　　ér guì shí mǔ
我独异于人，而贵食母。

I alone differ from people, as I value the nurturing mother.

Meaning

Chapter 20 is one of the most personal in the book, spoken in the first person by someone out of step with everyone else. It opens with a short line, get rid of "learning" and there will be no anxiety, then asks how great the difference is between a polite "yes" and a curt one, and how far removed from each other "good" and "evil" are.

The center of the chapter is a contrast. The crowd bustles about, as if enjoying the sacrifice or climbing the Spring Altar; the speaker alone remains, not yet revealed, like an infant who has not yet laughed. Others possess surplus and know everything; the speaker alone seems left behind, scattered and depressed, tranquil like the ocean, like high winds that never stop. The last line names the difference: I alone value 食母, the nurturing mother.

Several readings are uncertain. Some editors move the first line, 绝学无忧, to the end of chapter 19; this site keeps Wang Bi's division. 唯 and 阿 are two ways of saying yes, one polite, one curt. Wang Bi explains the nurturing mother as the root of life, which is the Way. The mother returns in chapter 52, and learning in chapter 48.

第二十一章 Chapter 21

Form, materiality and essence

kǒng dé zhī róng wéi dào shì cóng
孔德之容，惟道是从。

The great virtue's form, only originates from the Way.

dào zhī wéi wù wéi huǎng wéi hū
道之为物，惟恍惟惚。

The Way as a "thing" is only obscure and vague.

hū xī huǎng xī qí zhōng yǒu xiàng
惚兮恍兮，其中有象；

How obscure! How vague! In it there is form.

huǎng xī hū xī qí zhōng yǒu wù
恍兮惚兮，其中有物。

How vague! How obscure! In it there is materiality.

yǎo xī míng xī qí zhōng yǒu jīng
窈兮冥兮，其中有精；

How deep! How dark! In it there is essence.

qí jīng shèn zhēn qí zhōng yǒu xìn
其精甚真，其中有信。

Its essence is very real: within lies truth.

zì gǔ jí jīn qí míng bù qù
自古及今，其名不去，

From antiquity to the present, its name has never left it,

yǐ yuè zhòng fǔ
以阅众甫。

and the study of all its origins.

wú hé yǐ zhī zhòng fǔ zhī zhuàng zāi
吾何以知众甫之状哉？

How do I know the form of all its origins?

yǐ cǐ
以此。

By this.

Meaning

Chapter 21 says what can be said of the Way when it is spoken of as a thing. It begins with 孔德 (great virtue), whose form originates only from the Way. The Way itself is only obscure and vague, 惟恍惟惚, yet within that vagueness there is form, there is materiality, there is an essence, and the essence is very real: within lies truth.

The chapter moves from the faintest to the most solid: form, materiality, essence, truth. It then turns to time: "From antiquity to the present, its name has never left it, and the study of all its origins." 众甫, all its origins, are the beginnings of all things. How does the speaker know the form of all its origins? By this.

众甫 is a rare expression. This site follows Wang Bi, who explains it as the beginnings of things; the silk manuscripts write 众父, the fathers of all. The last line, "by this", is short and open: Wang Bi takes "this" to mean what has just been said. The obscure and vague comes from chapter 14 (惚恍, "the indistinct"), and the thing formed before heaven and earth follows in chapter 25.

第二十二章 Chapter 22

The bent made whole

qū zé quán wǎng zé zhí
曲则全，枉则直，

The bent is made whole, the crooked is straightened,

wā zé yíng bì zé xīn
洼则盈，敝则新，

the hole is filled, the worn-out is renewed,

shǎo zé dé duō zé huò
少则得，多则惑。

with few there is attainment, with much there is confusion.

shì yǐ shèng rén bào yī wéi tiān xià shì
是以圣人抱一，为天下式。

Therefore the sage embraces unity, and follows the universe's patterns.

bù zì xiàn gù míng bù zì shì gù zhāng
不自见故明，不自是故彰，

Does not show himself, and therefore is apparent. Does not affirm himself, and therefore is acknowledged.

bù zì fá gù yǒu gōng bù zì jīn gù zhǎng
不自伐故有功，不自矜故长。

Does not boast and therefore has merit. Does not glorify himself and can therefore improve.

fú wéi bù zhēng gù tiān xià mò néng yǔ zhī zhēng
夫唯不争，故天下莫能与之争。

He does not contend, therefore the world cannot contend with him.

gǔ zhī suǒ wèi qū zé quán zhě qǐ xū yán zāi
古之所谓曲则全者，岂虚言哉！

The ancient saying "The bent is made whole", how can it be regarded as empty talk?

chéngquán ér guī zhī
诚全而归之。

Be sincerely wholesome and return to it.

Meaning

Chapter 22 opens with an old saying, 曲则全, the bent is made whole, and five more like it: the crooked is straightened, the hole is filled, the worn-out is renewed, with few there is attainment, with much there is confusion. Each pairs a lack with its reversal.

The sage applies this to himself. He embraces 一, unity (the One), and follows the universe's patterns. He does not show himself, and therefore is apparent; does not affirm himself, and therefore is acknowledged; does not boast, and therefore has merit; does not glorify himself, and can therefore improve. He does not contend, therefore the world cannot contend with him.

The chapter closes by returning to its opening: can the old saying "The bent is made whole" be regarded as empty talk? The answer is a call: be sincerely wholesome and return to it. The four "does not" lines appear again, reversed, in chapter 24, where those who show themselves and boast fail, and the line on not contending returns in chapter 66. Where Wang Bi has 抱一, embrace the One, the silk manuscripts read 执一, hold to the One; the sense is close.

第二十三章 Chapter 23

Speaking little

xī yán zì rán
希言自然。

To speak little is natural.

gù piāo fēng bù zhōng zhāo
故飘风不终朝，

Similarly the wind does not blow the whole morning,

zhòu yǔ bù zhōng rì
骤雨不终日。

nor does a downpour last the whole day.

shú wéi cǐ zhě? tiān dì
孰为此者？天地。

What causes these? Heaven and earth.

tiān dì shàng bù néng jiǔ
天地尚不能久，

Even heaven and earth cannot make these last,

ér kuàng yú rén hū
而况于人乎？

how much less can people?

gù cóng shì yú dào zhě
故从事于道者，

Thus, by engaging with the Way,

tóng yú dào
同于道，

the daoist bonds with the Way,

dé zhě tóng yú dé
德者同于德，

the virtuous bonds with virtue,

shī zhě tóng yú shī
失者同于失。

the vanquished bonds with defeat.

tóng yú dào zhě dào yì lè dé zhī
同于道者，道亦乐得之；

The daoist who bonds, is also gladly received by the Way.

tóng yú dé zhě dé yì lè dé zhī
同于德者，德亦乐得之；

The virtuous who bonds, is also gladly received by virtue.

tóng yú shī zhě shī yì lè dé zhī
同于失者，失亦乐得之。

The vanquished who bonds, is also gladly received by defeat.

xìn bù zú yān yǒu bù xìn yān
信不足焉，有不信焉。

Where trust is insufficient, there is distrust.

Meaning

Chapter 23 begins with 希言自然: to speak little is natural (自然, literally "so of itself"). Nature gives the example. The wind does not blow the whole morning, nor does a downpour last the whole day. Heaven and earth cause them, and if even heaven and earth cannot make such outbursts last, how much less can people.

The chapter then turns to affinity. The daoist bonds with the Way, the virtuous with virtue, the vanquished with defeat. And each is gladly received in turn: the Way is glad to have the one who joins it, virtue too, and so is defeat. What one sides with takes one in.

The grammar of lines 7 to 13 is compressed and varies between editions; this site follows Wang Bi's text, except that line 8 says 同于道 where Wang Bi repeats 道者 (道者同于道), as the recitation and many editions do, and it reads 失 as loss, the opposite of the Way and virtue: defeat. The closing line, where trust is insufficient, there is distrust, also appears in chapter 17. 自然 returns at the end of chapter 25, and speaking little recalls the teaching without words of chapter 2.

第二十四章 Chapter 24

Standing and striding

qǐ zhě bù lì　　kuà zhě bù xíng
企者不立，跨者不行，

Standers do not remain upright, striders do not advance.

zì xiàn zhě bù míng　　zì shì zhě bù zhāng
自见者不明，自是者不彰，

They show themselves, but are invisible. Affirm themselves, but aren't acknowledged.

zì fá zhě wú gōng　　zì jīn zhě bù cháng
自伐者无功，自矜者不长。

They boast, but have no merit. They glorify themselves, and do not last.

qí zài dào yě　　yuē yú shí zhuì xíng
其在道也，曰余食赘行。

One who abides by the Way calls these "leftover foods" and "wasted actions",

wù huò wù zhī
物或恶之，

all things may loathe them.

gù yǒu dào zhě bù chǔ
故有道者不处。

Thus, the daoist does not act like this.

Meaning

Chapter 24 is about straining. Those who strain to stand do not remain upright; those who stride do not advance. 企 is rising on tiptoe, 跨 taking overlong steps. The image is physical and plain: forcing a posture makes it fail.

The same holds for self-assertion. Those who show themselves are invisible; those who affirm themselves are not acknowledged; those who boast have no merit; those who glorify themselves do not last. These four are the reverse of chapter 22, where the sage does none of these things and gains each in turn. One who abides by the Way calls such behavior "leftover foods" and "wasted actions", which all things may loathe; thus the daoist does not act like this.

余食贅行 is a hard phrase. 贅 is a useless growth on the body, and some editions write 形, form, for 行, so that the phrase means a useless outgrowth; this site keeps the plain reading of 行 as action. The warning against excess recalls chapter 9, and in chapter 29 the sage shuns extremes, grandiosity and excesses.

第二十五章 Chapter 25

Before heaven and earth

yǒu wù hùn chéng xiān tiān dì shēng
有物混成，先天地生。

Something formed out of chaos, born before heaven and earth.

jì xī liáo xī dú lì bù gǎi
寂兮寥兮，独立不改。

So silent and desolate! Self-standing and invariable.

zhōu xíng ér bù dài kě yǐ wéi tiān xià mǔ
周行而不殆，可以为天下母。

It revolves without tiring, and could be the mother of the world.

wú bù zhī qí míng zì zhī yuē dào
吾不知其名，字之曰道，

I don't know its name. As a word, I label it the "Way".

qiǎng wéi zhī míng yuē dà
强为之名曰大。

Imposing on it a name, I call it "great."

dà yuē shì shì yuē yuǎn
大曰逝，逝曰远，

Greatness encompasses the passing of time, the passing of time encompasses the distant,

yuǎn yuē fǎn
远曰反。

the distant entails return.

gù dào dà tiān dà
故道大，天大，

Hence, the Way is great, the universe is great,

dì dà wáng yì dà
地大，王亦大。

the earth is great, and the king is also great.

yù zhōng yǒu sì dà ér wáng jū qí yī yān
域中有四大，而王居其一焉。

Within our realm there are four greatnesses, and the king is one of them.

rén fǎ dì dì fǎ tiān
人法地，地法天，

Human beings follow the earth, earth follows the cosmos.

tiān fǎ dào dào fǎ zì rán
天法道，道法自然。

The cosmos follows the Way, the Way follows nature.

Meaning

Chapter 25 describes what was there before heaven and earth: silent and empty, standing alone and unchanging, going round everywhere without tiring. It can be thought of as the mother of the world. The speaker does not know its name, gives it the style name 道 (the Way), and, forced to name it, calls it great.

From "great" the text moves outward and back: greatness encompasses the passing of time, the passing of time encompasses the distant, and the distant entails return. Then come four greats, the Way, the universe, earth and the king, and a chain of models: human beings follow the earth, earth follows the cosmos, the cosmos follows the Way, and the Way follows 自然, nature (what is so of itself).

The last phrase is famous and much discussed: 自然 is not a fifth thing above the Way. Wang Bi explains that the Way does not go against what is so of itself: in the

square it follows the square, in the round it follows the round. In line 9 Wang Bi's text reads 王, the king, while some editions read 人, the human. The nameless thing recalls chapter 1, and the return chapter 40.

第二十六章 Chapter 26

Heavy and light

zhòng wéi qīng gēn　　jìng wéi zào jūn
重为轻根，静为躁君。

Heaviness is the root of lightness, composure rules impetuousness.

shì yǐ shèng rén zhōng rì xíng bù lí zī zhòng
是以圣人终日行不离辎重。

Therefore the sage travels all day without putting down his heavy load.

wéi yǒu róng guàn　　yàn chǔ chāo rán
唯有荣观，燕处超然，

Though there may be spectacles to see, he effortlessly remains composed.

nài hé wàn shèng zhī zhǔ
奈何万乘之主，

What's to be done with the innumerable leaders,

ér yǐ shēn qīng tiān xià
而以身轻天下？

that are so concerned with themselves as to disregard the rest of the world?

qīng zé shī běn　　zào zé shī jūn
轻则失本，躁则失君。

Frivolousness leads to lost roots, impetuousness leads to lost rulership.

Meaning

Chapter 26 is about weight and calm as the ground of all that moves. The heavy and the composed come first; the light and the impetuous depend on them.

The image that follows is a journey. The sage travels all day without putting down his heavy load, 辎重, literally the baggage carts. Though there may be spectacles to see, he effortlessly remains composed. Then comes a question about rulers: what is to be done with the innumerable leaders (万乘之主, lords of ten thousand chariots) so concerned with themselves that they disregard the rest of the world? Frivolousness leads to lost roots, impetuousness leads to lost rulership.

The chapter plays on 轻 and 重, light and heavy, which in Chinese also mean taking something lightly or seriously. Wang Bi's text has 圣人, the sage, in line 2, where the silk manuscripts and some other editions read 君子, the noble one. A ruler's relation between his own person and the world is the subject of chapter 13, and chapter 45 says 清静为天下正: clear and still, one sets the world right.

第二十七章 Chapter 27

Skill without a trace

shàn xíng wú zhé jì
善行无辙迹，

A good traveler leaves no tracks,

shàn yán wú xiá zhé
善言无瑕谪，

a good speaker lacks flaws and rebuke,

shàn shù bù yòng chóu cè
善数不用筹策，

a good counter needs no calculator.

shàn bì wú guān jiàn ér bù kě kāi
善闭无关楗而不可开，

What is properly closed requires no lock, and yet cannot be opened,

shàn jié wú shéng yuē ér bù kě jiě
善结无绳约而不可解。

what is well bound requires no knot, and yet cannot be untied.

shì yǐ shèng rén cháng shàn jiù rén
是以圣人常善救人，

This is how the sage always elevates people,

gù wú qì rén
故无弃人；

and doesn't ostracize others.

cháng shàn jiù wù gù wú qì wù
常善救物， 故无弃物，

He always takes care of things, and doesn't cast away anything.

shì wèi xí míng
是谓袭明。

This is called following the light.

gù shàn rén zhě　　bù shàn rén zhī shī
故善人者，不善人之师；

Hence, the benefactor is the teacher of the lesser person,

bù shàn rén zhě　　shàn rén zhī zī
不善人者，善人之资。

the lesser person is the endowment of the benefactor.

bù guì qí shī，　bù ài qí zī，
不贵其师，不爱其资，

Fail to value the teacher, fail to like the endowment,

suī zhì dà mí，
虽智大迷，

though you may be intelligent, you are greatly confused,

shì wèi yào miào
是谓要妙。

this is called the essential subtlety.

Meaning

Chapter 27 begins with five examples of skill so complete that its tools disappear: a good traveler leaves no tracks, a good speaker lacks flaws and rebuke, a good counter needs no calculator, what is properly closed requires no lock yet cannot be opened, what is well bound requires no knot yet cannot be untied.

The sage is skilled in the same way with people. He always elevates people, and doesn't ostracize others; he always takes care of things, and doesn't cast away anything. This is called 袭明, rendered "following the light"; 袭 can mean to carry on or to cover, and the phrase is read both ways. The benefactor is the teacher of the lesser person, and the lesser person is the benefactor's 资, the

endowment. Whoever fails to value the teacher or to like the endowment is greatly confused, however clever: this is called the essential subtlety.

This site reads 资 with Wang Bi, as what the benefactor draws on. That no one is ostracized returns in chapter 62, where the Way protects even those who are not good, and in chapter 49.

第二十八章 Chapter 28

Masculinity and femininity

zhī qí xióng shǒu qí cí wéi tiān xià xī
知其雄，守其雌，为天下溪。

Know masculinity, abide by femininity, be as the world's stream.

wéi tiān xià xī cháng dé bù lí
为天下溪，常德不离，

Be as the world's stream, and the enduring virtue shall not fade,

fù guī yú yīng ér
复归于婴儿。

ever returning to the newborn.

zhī qí bái shǒu qí hēi wéi tiān xià shì
知其白，守其黑，为天下式。

Know whiteness, abide by darkness, be as the world's model.

wéi tiān xià shì cháng dé bù tè
为天下式，常德不忒，

Be as the world's model, and the enduring virtue shall be faultless,

fù guī yú wú jí
复归于无极。

ever reverting to infinity.

zhī qí róng shǒu qí rǔ wéi tiān xià gǔ
知其荣，守其辱，为天下谷。

Know glory, abide by disgrace, be as the world's valley.

wéi tiān xià gǔ cháng dé nǎi zú
为天下谷，常德乃足，

Be as the world's valley, and the enduring virtue shall be sufficient,

fù guī yú pǔ
复归于朴。

ever returning to the uncarved block.

pǔ sàn zé wéi qì
朴散则为器，

Once simplicity is dispersed, so as to craft an instrument,

shèng rén yòng zhī zé wéi guānzhǎng
圣人用之则为官长。

the sage, using them, sets up the heads of officials.

gù dà zhì bù gē
故大制不割。

Therefore, great governance does not seek to process simplicity.

Meaning

Chapter 28 is about choosing the lower place: of each pair, one knows the higher side and abides by the lower.

The chapter is built from three parallel stanzas. Each pairs a quality to know with one to keep: 雄 and 雌, masculinity and femininity; 白 and 黑, whiteness and darkness; 荣 and 辱, glory and disgrace. Abiding by the lower side makes one the world's stream, model and valley (the stream and the valley are low places that things flow into), and each stanza ends with a return: to the newborn, to infinity (无极) and to 朴, the uncarved block. The female and the valley recall chapters 6 and 10; the newborn comes back in chapter 55.

The last lines turn to government. Once simplicity, the uncarved block, is dispersed to craft instruments, the sage, using them, sets up the heads of officials; yet the closing line says that great governance, 大制, does not seek to process simplicity. 制 means both cutting and ruling; the site keeps both senses and follows Wang Bi, for whom the greatest rule takes the mind of the world as its own and so divides nothing. Chapter 32 takes up the same image of cutting and names.

第二十九章 Chapter 29

The sacred vessel

jiāng yù qǔ tiān xià ér wéi zhī
将欲取天下而为之，

If you wish to take the world and run it,

wú jiàn qí bù dé yǐ
吾见其不得已。

I can see that you will not succeed.

tiān xià shén qì bù kě wéi yě
天下神器，不可为也。

The world is a sacred vessel that cannot be acted upon.

wéi zhě bài zhī zhí zhě shī zhī
为者败之，执者失之。

Manipulators spoil it, commanders lose it.

gù wù huò xíng huò suí
故物或行或随，

Thus, some things move, while some follow.

huò xū huò chuī
或歔或吹，

Some sigh, while some blow.

huò qiáng huò léi
或强或羸，

Some are strong, while some are weak.

huò cuò huò huī
或挫或隳。

Some destroy, while some are destroyed.

shì yǐ shèng rén qù shèn
是以圣人去甚，

Hence, the sage shuns extremes,

qù shē qù tài
去奢，去泰。

shuns grandiosity, shuns excesses.

Meaning

Chapter 29 warns that no one who sets out to take the world and run it will succeed.

The world is called 神器, a sacred vessel. Wang Bi explains 神 as what has no fixed shape or place and 器 as something put together: the world is assembled without a shape, so it cannot be handled like an ordinary object. Two short clauses give the result, manipulators spoil it and commanders lose it, and they return word for word in chapter 64. A list of contrasts follows: some things move and some follow, some sigh and some blow, some are strong and some weak, some destroy and some are destroyed. Things differ and change on their own, which is why forcing them into one plan fails.

The conclusion is modest. The sage does not try to control this variety; he only shuns what is too much: extremes, grandiosity and excesses (甚, 奢, 泰). The chapter belongs with chapter 48, on winning the world by leaving it alone, and with chapter 30, on the use of force.

第三十章 Chapter 30

Not by force of arms

yǐ dào zuǒ rén zhǔ zhě
以道佐人主者，

Using the Way to assist the ruler,

bù yǐ bīng qiáng tiān xià
不以兵强天下，

is not a means to dominate people by military force.

qí shì hào huán
其事好还。

This undertaking backfires.

shī zhī suǒ chù jīng jí shēng yān
师之所处，荆棘生焉。

Where troops have camped, thorns and brambles grow.

dà jūn zhī hòu bì yǒu xiōng nián
大军之后，必有凶年。

A great war's aftermath, necessarily involves famine.

shàn zhě guǒ ér yǐ bù gǎn yǐ qǔ qiáng
善者果而已，不敢以取强。

Great virtue brings results, nothing else. Do not dare to use violence.

guǒ ér wù jīn guǒ ér wù fá
果而勿矜，果而勿伐，

Accomplish but don't boast, accomplish but don't vaunt,

guǒ ér wù jiāo guǒ ér bù dé yǐ
果而勿骄，果而不得已，

accomplish but don't be proud, accomplish and that is all,

guǒ ér wù qiáng
果而勿强。

accomplish but don't use violence.

wù zhuàng zé lǎo
物壮则老，

Things with strength ultimately wither,

shì wèi bù dào bù dào zǎo yǐ
是谓不道， 不道早已。

this is not the Way, and what is not the Way soon ends.

Meaning

Chapter 30 is about war, and why the Way has no use for it: using the Way to assist the ruler is not a means to dominate people by military force, because this undertaking backfires (其事好还).

The images are concrete. Where troops have camped, thorns and brambles grow; a great war's aftermath necessarily involves famine. Against this the chapter sets 果, bringing results. Great virtue brings results, nothing else; do not dare to use violence. Wang Bi glosses 果 as getting through a difficulty: one who leads troops well ends the danger and goes no further. Five short lines repeat the word: accomplish, but do not boast, do not vaunt, do not be proud; accomplish, and that is all; accomplish, but do not use violence.

The last lines widen the point. Things with strength ultimately wither; this is not the Way (不道), and what is not the Way soon ends. The same lines close chapter 55. Chapter 31 continues with weapons and war, and chapter 69 returns to the use of troops.

第三十一章 Chapter 31

Weapons of ill omen

fú jiā bīng zhě bù xiáng zhī qì
夫佳兵者，不祥之器。

Fine weapons are instruments of ill omen.

wù huò wù zhī gù yǒu dào zhě bù chǔ
物或恶之，故有道者不处。

All things may loathe them, so the daoist does not keep them.

jūn zǐ jū zé guì zuǒ yòng bīng zé guì yòu
君子居则贵左，用兵则贵右。

At home, the noble one honors the left; at war, he honors the right.

bīng zhě bù xiáng zhī qì
兵者，不祥之器，

Weapons are instruments of ill omen,

fēi jūn zǐ zhī qì
非君子之器。

not the instruments of the noble one.

bù dé yǐ ér yòng zhī
不得已而用之，

When he has no choice but to use them,

tián dàn wéi shàng shèng ér bù měi
恬淡为上，胜而不美。

calm restraint is best. Victory is not beautiful.

ér měi zhī zhě shì lè shā rén
而美之者，是乐杀人。

To find it beautiful is to delight in killing people.

fú lè shā rén zhě
夫乐杀人者，

One who delights in killing people

zé bù kě dé zhì yú tiān xià yǐ
则不可得志于天下矣。

cannot achieve his aims in the world.

jí shì shàng zuǒ xiōng shì shàng yòu
吉事尚左， 凶事尚右。

In happy affairs the left is honored; in mournful affairs, the right.

piān jiàng jūn jū zuǒ shàngjiàng jūn jū yòu
偏将军居左， 上将军居右，

The second general stands on the left, the commanding general on the right,

yán yǐ sāng lǐ chǔ zhī
言以丧礼处之。

which means war is treated as a funeral.

shā rén zhī zhòng yǐ āi bēi qì zhī，
杀人之众， 以哀悲泣之，

When many people are killed, they are wept for in grief and sorrow.

zhàn shèng yǐ sāng lǐ chǔ zhī
战胜， 以丧礼处之。

A victory in war is treated as a funeral.

Meaning

Chapter 31 is about how the noble one regards war: as something to mourn, even when it is won.

The argument runs through the custom of left and right. At home the noble one, 君子, honors the left, the side of good fortune; in war the right is honored, the

side of mourning. On campaign the second general stands on the left and the commanding general on the right, which shows that war is arranged like a funeral rite. The noble one uses weapons only when there is no other choice, with calm restraint: victory is not beautiful, and to find it beautiful is to delight in killing people.

The chapter is unusual. The received Wang Bi commentary has no notes on it, and its repetitions have led some readers to suspect that early notes became mixed into the text, though the Guodian bamboo manuscripts already have most of it; the site recites and translates it as received. It continues chapter 30 on force, and can be read with chapter 69 on the use of troops.

第三十二章 Chapter 32

Constantly nameless

dào cháng wú míng pǔ suī xiǎo
道常无名，朴虽小，

The Way is constantly nameless. Though the uncarved block is small,

tiān xià mò néng chén yě
天下莫能臣也。

no one in the world can make it a subject.

hóu wáng ruò néng shǒu zhī
侯王若能守之，

If lords and kings could hold to it,

wàn wù jiāng zì bīn
万物将自宾。

the myriad things would come to them as guests of their own accord.

tiān dì xiāng hé yǐ jiàng gān lù
天地相合以降甘露，

Heaven and earth would join and let sweet dew fall,

mín mò zhī lìng ér zì jūn
民莫之令而自均。

and the people, with no one ordering them, would share it evenly.

shǐ zhì yǒu míng míng yì jì yǒu
始制有名，名亦既有，

When the block is first cut, there are names. Once there are names,

fú yì jiāng zhī zhǐ
夫亦将知止。

one should also know when to stop.

zhī zhǐ kě yǐ bù dài
知止可以不殆。

Knowing when to stop, one can avoid danger.

pì dào zhī zài tiān xià
譬道之在天下，

The Way in the world

yóu chuān gǔ zhī yú jiāng hǎi
犹川谷之于江海。

is like the rivers and seas that the streams of the valleys flow into.

Meaning

Chapter 32 is about the Way before names, what it gives a ruler who holds to it, and the limit that names call for.

The opening joins two images. The Way is constantly nameless (无名), and 朴, the uncarved block, though small, cannot be made anyone's subject. If lords and kings held to it, the myriad things would come to them like guests, heaven and earth would let sweet dew fall, and the people would share it evenly with no one giving orders. The words 道常无名，朴虽小 can be punctuated in more than one way; the site follows Wang Bi, who reads 无名 and 朴 as two descriptions of the Way.

The middle lines take up the image of chapter 28: when the block is first cut, names appear. Names are not condemned, but they call for 知止, knowing when to stop, a phrase that returns in chapter 44. The chapter ends with water: the Way in the world is like the rivers and seas that the streams of the valleys flow into. With Wang Bi, the site takes the Way as the rivers and seas, the low place that everything flows to of itself, an image that chapter 66 develops.

第三十三章 Chapter 33

Knowing yourself

zhī rén zhě zhì　　zì zhī zhě míng
知人者智，　自知者明。

Knowing others is wisdom; knowing yourself is clarity.

shèng rén zhě yǒu lì　　zì shèng zhě qiáng
胜人者有力，　自胜者强。

Overcoming others takes force; overcoming yourself is strength.

zhī zú zhě fù　　qiáng xíng zhě yǒu zhì，
知足者富，　强行者有志，

Knowing what is enough is wealth; persevering is having will.

bù shī qí suǒ zhě jiǔ，
不失其所者久，

Not losing your place is to last.

sǐ ér bù wáng zhě shòu。
死而不亡者寿。

To die and not perish is long life.

Meaning

Chapter 33 contrasts what one can gain over others with what one can achieve in oneself.

It is a chain of short definitions in pairs. Knowing others is wisdom (智); knowing yourself is clarity (明). Overcoming others takes force; overcoming yourself is strength. Each pair puts the outward achievement first and then a harder, inward one. The third line adds two clauses of the same kind: knowing what is enough (知足) is wealth, and persevering is having will. 明, clarity, is a word the text keeps for deep understanding, as in chapter 16, where knowing the constant is called brilliance, the same 明, and in chapter 52.

The last two lines turn to lasting. Not losing one's place is to last, and to die without perishing is long life. The final line is read in different ways; Wang Bi explains that the body dies but the Way by which one lived does not disappear, and the site's translation keeps to the plain words. Knowing what is enough returns in chapters 44 and 46.

第三十四章 Chapter 34

The great Way flows everywhere

dà dào fàn xī qí kě zuǒ yòu
大道泛兮，其可左右。

The great Way flows everywhere; it can go left or right.

wàn wù shì zhī ér shēng ér bù cí
万物恃之而生而不辞，

The myriad things rely on it for life, and it does not refuse them.

gōng chéng bù míng yǒu
功成不名有，

It completes its work but does not claim it.

yì yǎng wàn wù ér bù wéi zhǔ，
衣养万物而不为主，

It clothes and feeds the myriad things but does not act as their master.

cháng wú yù kě míng yú xiǎo；
常无欲，可名于小；

Ever without desire, it can be called small;

wàn wù guī yān ér bù wéi zhǔ，
万物归焉而不为主，

the myriad things return to it, yet it does not act as their master:

kě míng wéi dà。
可名为大。

it can be called great.

yǐ qí zhōng bù zì wéi dà，
以其终不自为大，

Because it never makes itself great,

gù néngchéng qí dà
故能成其大。

it can achieve its greatness.

Meaning

Chapter 34 is about how the Way can be called both small and great.

It opens with an image of water spreading in every direction: the great Way flows everywhere and can go left or right. The myriad things rely on it for life, and it does not refuse them; it completes its work without claiming it, and clothes and feeds them without acting as their master. These lines echo chapters 2 and 51, where the sage lives without possessing.

The chapter then plays on two names. Because it is always without desire, the Way can be called small; because all things return to it while it does not rule them, it can be called great. The conclusion is that it never makes itself great, and that is how it achieves its greatness. Chapter 63 says nearly the same of the sage. In 功成不名有, 名 is read as a verb, to claim as one's own.

第三十五章 Chapter 35

The great image

zhí dà xiàng tiān xià wǎng
执大象，天下往；

Hold to the great image, and the world will come;

wǎng ér bù hài ān píng tài
往而不害，安平太。

it comes and is not harmed: peace, calm and ease.

yuè yǔ ěr guò kè zhǐ
乐与饵，过客止。

Music and fine food make the passer-by stop.

dào zhī chū kǒu
道之出口，

But when the Way is spoken,

dàn hū qí wú wèi
淡乎其无味。

it is bland and has no flavor.

shì zhī bù zú jiàn
视之不足见，

Looked at, it cannot be seen;

tīng zhī bù zú wén
听之不足闻，

listened to, it cannot be heard;

yòng zhī bù zú jì
用之不足既。

used, it cannot be exhausted.

Meaning

Chapter 35 is about the plainness of the Way and the strength hidden in it.

The great image (大象) stands for the Way; chapter 41 says that the great image has no shape. Whoever holds to it sees the world come, and those who come suffer no harm: peace, calm and ease. The chapter then sets this against what usually draws people: music and fine food make the passer-by stop. When the Way is spoken, by contrast, it is bland and has no flavor.

Of the last three lines, the first two echo chapter 14: looked at, it cannot be seen; listened to, it cannot be heard. The third turns the lack into a strength: used, it cannot be exhausted, as chapter 4 says: the Way is empty, yet used, it never fills up. In this chapter the plainness of the Way and its endurance are two sides of the same thing.

第三十六章 Chapter 36

Subtle insight

jiāng yù xī zhī bì gù zhāng zhī
将欲歙之，必固张之；

What is to be shrunk must first be stretched;

jiāng yù ruò zhī bì gù qiáng zhī
将欲弱之，必固强之；

what is to be weakened must first be strengthened;

jiāng yù fèi zhī bì gù xīng zhī
将欲废之，必固兴之；

what is to be cast down must first be raised up;

jiāng yù duó zhī bì gù yǔ zhī，
将欲夺之，必固与之，

what is to be taken must first be given.

shì wèi wēi míng
是谓微明。

This is called subtle insight.

róu ruò shèng gāng qiáng
柔弱胜刚强。

The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.

yú bù kě tuō yú yuān
鱼不可脱于渊，

Fish must not leave the deep water;

guó zhī lì qì bù kě yǐ shì rén。
国之利器不可以示人。

the sharp tools of the state must not be shown to people.

Meaning

Chapter 36 is about reversal: a thing reaches its height before it falls.

Four parallel lines set out the pattern: shrinking follows stretching, weakening follows strengthening, casting down follows raising up, and taking follows giving. The chapter calls this 微明, subtle insight, and draws the rule that the soft and weak overcome the hard and strong (柔弱胜刚强), a theme of chapters 43, 76 and 78.

These lines are among the most disputed in the book. Read as tactics, they advise building up an enemy in order to ruin him, and the Legalist Han Fei cites them in that sense. Wang Bi reads them differently: to remove the violent, one follows the nature of things and lets the violent bring themselves down, without relying on punishment. The site follows Wang Bi. The closing pair, the fish that must stay in deep water and the sharp tools of the state that must not be shown, is read in the same spirit: for Wang Bi, showing them means governing by punishment.

第三十七章 Chapter 37

Non-action

dào cháng wú wéi ér wú bù wéi
道常无为而无不为，

The Way never acts, yet nothing is left undone.

hóu wáng ruò néng shǒu zhī
侯王若能守之，

If lords and kings could hold to it,

wàn wù jiāng zì huà
万物将自化。

the myriad things would transform of themselves.

huà ér yù zuò
化而欲作，

If, while they transform, desires arise,

wú jiāng zhèn zhī yǐ wú míng zhī pǔ
吾将镇之以无名之朴。

I would calm them with the nameless uncarved block.

wú míng zhī pǔ
无名之朴，

The nameless uncarved block

fú yì jiāng wú yù
夫亦将无欲。

brings an end to desire.

bù yù yǐ jìng
不欲以静，

Without desire there is stillness,

tiān xià jiāng zì dìng
天下将自定。

and the world settles of itself.

Meaning

Chapter 37 closes the first part of the book, the part on the Way, with the claim that the Way does not act and yet nothing is left undone.

The opening line, 道常无为而无不为, is the fullest statement of 无为 (non-action), and chapter 48 repeats it. The chapter applies it to rulers: if lords and kings could hold to the Way, the myriad things would transform of themselves (自化), as the people do in chapter 57. Change is not the problem; what the chapter watches for is desire arising in the middle of it.

Its answer is the nameless uncarved block, 朴, already met in chapters 28 and 32. The speaker would calm desire with it, and the block itself brings an end to desire. The last lines run as a chain: without desire there is stillness, and with stillness the world settles of itself. Stillness as the ground of order recalls chapter 16, and chapter 45 ends the same way, with clarity and stillness setting the world right.

德 经

The Book of Virtue

第三十八章 Chapter 38

Superior virtue

shàng dé bù dé shì yǐ yǒu dé
上德不德，是以有德；

Superior virtue is not "virtuous"; that is why it has virtue.

xià dé bù shī dé shì yǐ wú dé
下德不失德，是以无德。

Inferior virtue never lets go of virtue; that is why it has no virtue.

shàng dé wú wéi ér wú yǐ wéi
上德无为而无以为，

Superior virtue does not act, and has no motive for acting.

xià dé wéi zhī ér yǒu yǐ wéi
下德为之而有以为。

Inferior virtue acts, and has a motive for acting.

shàng rén wéi zhī ér wú yǐ wéi
上仁为之而无以为，

Superior humaneness acts, but has no motive for acting.

shàng yì wéi zhī ér yǒu yǐ wéi
上义为之而有以为，

Superior justice acts, and has a motive for acting.

shàng lǐ wéi zhī ér mò zhī yìng
上礼为之而莫之应，

Superior ritual acts, and when no one responds,

zé rǎng bì ér rēng zhī
则攘臂而扔之。

it rolls up its sleeves and forces people.

gù shī dào ér hòu dé shī dé ér hòu rén
故失道而后德，失德而后仁，

So when the Way is lost, there is virtue; when virtue is lost, there is humaneness;

shī rén ér hòu yì shī yì ér hòu lǐ
失仁而后义，失义而后礼。

when humaneness is lost, there is justice; when justice is lost, there is ritual.

fú lǐ zhě zhōng xìn zhī bó ér luàn zhī shǒu
夫礼者，忠信之薄而乱之首。

Ritual is the thinning of loyalty and trust, and the start of disorder.

qián shí zhě dào zhī huá ér yú zhī shǐ
前识者，道之华而愚之始。

Foreknowledge is the flower of the Way and the beginning of folly.

shì yǐ dà zhàng fū chǔ qí hòu
是以大丈夫处其厚，

So the great man dwells in what is thick,

bù jū qí bó
不居其薄；

not in what is thin;

chǔ qí shí bù jū qí huá
处其实，不居其华。

in the fruit, not in the flower.

gù qù bǐ qǔ cǐ
故去彼取此。

Thus he lets go of that, and takes up this.

Meaning

Chapter 38 opens the second part of the book, the part on virtue, by setting true virtue against the effort to be virtuous.

Superior virtue (上德) is not "virtuous", and that is why it has virtue; inferior virtue never lets go of virtue and so has none. The chapter then ranks values prized by the Confucian tradition by whether they act and why: superior virtue does not act and has no motive for acting; humaneness (仁) acts without a motive; justice (义) acts with one; ritual (礼) acts, and when no one responds, rolls up its sleeves and forces people. Hence the famous descent: when the Way is lost there is virtue, then humaneness, then justice, then ritual, which is the thinning of loyalty and trust and the start of disorder. Chapter 18 makes a similar point.

The ending uses plant images. Foreknowledge is the flower of the Way and the beginning of folly; the great man dwells in the thick rather than the thin, in the fruit rather than the flower. The site reads 无以为 with Wang Bi, as having no motive for acting; his note on this chapter is the longest in his commentary. The closing words, letting go of that and taking up this, also end chapters 12 and 72.

第三十九章 Chapter 39

Attaining the One

xī zhī dé yī zhě tiān dé yī yǐ qīng
昔之得一者，天得一以清，

Of old, these attained the One: heaven attained the One and became clear,

dì dé yī yǐ níng shén dé yī yǐ líng
地得一以宁，神得一以灵，

earth attained the One and became calm, the spirits attained the One and became potent,

gǔ dé yī yǐ yíng wàn wù dé yī yǐ shēng
谷得一以盈，万物得一以生，

the valley attained the One and became full, the myriad things attained the One and came to life,

hóu wáng dé yī yǐ wéi tiān xià zhēn
侯王得一以为天下贞。

lords and kings attained the One and became the standard of the world.

qí zhì zhī
其致之。

It is the One that brought this about.

tiān wú yǐ qīng jiāng kǒng liè
天无以清将恐裂，

If heaven were not clear, it might split;

dì wú yǐ níng jiāng kǒng fèi
地无以宁将恐废，

if earth were not calm, it might fall to ruin;

shén wú yǐ líng jiāng kǒng xiē
神无以灵将恐歇，

if the spirits were not potent, they might fade away;

gǔ wú yǐ yíng jiāng kǒng jié
谷无以盈将恐竭，

if the valley were not full, it might run dry;

wàn wù wú yǐ shēngjiāng kǒng miè
万物无以生将恐灭，

if the myriad things did not live, they might perish;

hóu wáng wú yǐ guì gāo jiāng kǒng jué
侯王无以贵高将恐蹶。

if lords and kings were not noble and high, they might fall.

gù guì yǐ jiàn wéi běn gāo yǐ xià wéi jī
故贵以贱为本，高以下为基。

So the noble has the humble as its root, and the high has the low as its base.

shì yǐ hóu wáng zì wèi gū guǎ bù gǔ
是以侯王自谓孤、寡、不谷。

That is why lords and kings call themselves "orphaned", "widowed" and "unworthy".

cǐ fēi yǐ jiàn wéi běn yé fēi hū
此非以贱为本邪？非乎？

Is this not taking the humble as the root? Is it not?

gù zhì shù yú wú yú
故致数舆无舆。

So if you count the parts of a carriage, there is no carriage.

bù yù lù lù rú yù
不欲琭琭如玉，

Do not wish to glitter like jade,

luò luò rú shí
珞珞如石 。

but be plain and hard like stone.

Meaning

Chapter 39 is about the One (一), what it gives to all that attain it, and what rulers should learn from it.

The first half runs through the same list twice. Heaven attained the One and became clear, earth became calm, the spirits potent, the valley full, the myriad things alive, and lords and kings became the standard of the world. The second pass turns the list around: without what the One gives, heaven might split, earth might fall to ruin, the valley might run dry and rulers might fall. The One is also the 一 of 抱一 in chapters 10 and 22, where the lines speak of uniting soul and body and of the sage who embraces unity, and chapter 42 places the One just after the Way.

The second half draws a lesson for rulers: the noble has the humble as its root and the high has the low as its base, which is why kings call themselves orphaned, widowed and unworthy, as chapter 42 also notes. In line 7, Wang Bi writes 将恐发, "might burst"; the recitation, like many editions, says 将恐废, "might fall to ruin", and the site follows it. The line 致数輿无輿 is hard. Wang Bi's text has 輿, a carriage, and the site reads it as counting the parts of a carriage until there is no carriage; other editions have 誉, praise: seek too much praise and there is none. The chapter ends by preferring plain stone to glittering jade, as most readers take it, and the site keeps that reading; Wang Bi and Heshang Gong read both halves as not to be wished for, neither the glitter of jade nor the hardness of stone.

第四十章 Chapter 40

Returning

fǎn zhě dào zhī dòng
反者，道之动；

Returning is the movement of the Way;

ruò zhě dào zhī yòng
弱者，道之用。

weakness is the use of the Way.

tiān xià wàn wù shēng yú yǒu
天下万物生于有，

The myriad things of the world are born from presence,

yǒu shēng yú wú
有生于无。

and presence is born from absence.

Meaning

Chapter 40 is about how the Way moves and where the myriad things come from, said in four lines.

Returning (反) is the movement of the Way, and weakness (弱) is its use. 反 means both turning back and turning into the opposite; as in chapter 25 (远曰反), the site keeps both senses. The second line ties the Way to the theme of chapters 36, 43 and 78: the soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.

The last two lines give an order of birth: the myriad things of the world are born from presence (有), and presence is born from absence (无). The pair comes from chapters 2 and 11: in chapter 2 presence and absence produce each other, and in chapter 11 the empty space in a cart, a pot or a room is what makes it useful. Here they are set in sequence instead, with absence first. Wang Bi's note on this chapter says that what begins to exist has absence as its root (以无为本), the idea at the center of his reading of the whole book.

第四十一章 Chapter 41

Hearing of the Way

shàng shì wén dào
上士闻道，

When the superior scholar hears of the Way,

qín ér xíng zhī
勤而行之；

he practices it diligently;

zhōng shì wén dào
中士闻道，

when the average scholar hears of the Way,

ruò cún ruò wáng
若存若亡；

he half keeps it, half loses it;

xià shì wén dào， dà xiào zhī。
下士闻道， 大笑之。

when the lesser scholar hears of the Way, he laughs out loud at it.

bù xiào bù zú yǐ wéi dào。
不笑不足以为道。

If he did not laugh, it would not be the Way.

gù jiàn yán yǒu zhī：
故建言有之：

So the established sayings have it:

míng dào ruò mèi， jìn dào ruò tuì，
明道若昧， 进道若退，

The bright Way seems dark, the Way forward seems to go back,

yí dào ruò lèi　　shàng dé ruò gǔ
夷道若颣，上德若谷，

the smooth Way seems rough, the highest virtue seems like a valley,

dà bái ruò rǔ　　guǎng dé ruò bù zú
大白若辱，广德若不足，

the purest white seems soiled, broad virtue seems not enough,

jiàn dé ruò tōu
建德若偷，

firm virtue seems idle,

zhì zhēn ruò yú
质真若渝，

true substance seems to change,

dà fāng wú yú　　dà qì wǎn chéng
大方无隅，大器晚成，

the great square has no corners, the great vessel is finished late,

dà yīn xī shēng　　dà xiàng wú xíng
大音希声，大象无形，

the great sound is barely heard, the great image has no shape,

dào yǐn wú míng
道隐无名。

the Way is hidden and nameless.

fú wéi dào　　shàn dài qiě chéng
夫唯道，善贷且成。

Only the Way is good at giving and at completing.

Meaning

Chapter 41 is about why the Way is so easily mistaken: what is highest in it looks, to most people, like its opposite, and even worth laughing at.

It begins with three kinds of scholar (士). The superior one hears of the Way and practices it; the average one half keeps it and half loses it; the lesser one laughs out loud, and the chapter adds that if he did not laugh, it would not be the Way. The laughter is taken as a sign: the Way does not look like what people expect.

The established sayings that follow make the same point line by line: the bright Way seems dark, the highest virtue seems like a valley, the purest white seems soiled, the great square has no corners, the great sound is barely heard, the great image has no shape. In 大器晚成, a silk manuscript from Mawangdui writes 免 for 晚, and some read the line as the great vessel is never finished; the site follows Wang Bi's 晚, finished late. Chapter 45 continues the list, and the closing line, that only the Way is good at giving and completing, recalls the Way that gives life in chapter 51.

第四十二章 Chapter 42

One, two, three

dào shēng yī
道生一，

The Way gives birth to one,

yī shēng èr　　èr shēng sān
一生二，二生三，

one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three,

sān shēng wàn wù
三生万物。

three gives birth to the myriad things.

wàn wù fù yīn ér bào yáng
万物负阴而抱阳，

The myriad things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang,

chōng qì yǐ wéi hé
冲气以为和。

and the blending breath brings them into harmony.

rén zhī suǒ wù　　wéi gū　　guǎ　　bù gǔ
人之所恶，唯孤、寡、不谷，

What people loathe is to be "orphaned", "widowed" and "unworthy",

ér wáng gōng yǐ wéi chēng
而王公以为称。

yet kings and lords use these as their titles.

gù wù huò sǔn zhī ér yì
故物或损之而益，

So things may gain by being diminished,

huò yì zhī ér sǔn
或益之而损。

or lose by being increased.

rén zhī suǒ jiào wǒ yì jiào zhī
人之所教，我亦教之。

What others teach, I also teach:

qiángliáng zhě bù dé qí sǐ，
强梁者不得其死，

the violent do not die a natural death.

wú jiāng yǐ wéi jiào fù
吾将以为教父。

I will make this the father of my teaching.

Meaning

Chapter 42 puts two subjects side by side: how all things come from the Way, and why what looks like loss or lowliness can be a gain.

The opening sequence is one of the most quoted passages in the book: the Way gives birth to one, one to two, two to three, and three to the myriad things. The text does not say what one, two and three are. Many readers take two as yin and yang, which the next line names, and three as the blending breath (冲气) that brings them into harmony. Wang Bi explains the sequence through naming instead: to call something "one" already adds a word to it, which makes two, and the two with the one make three. The site's translation keeps the bare numbers.

The second half returns to the humble titles of chapter 39: what people loathe, to be orphaned, widowed and unworthy, kings and lords use as their titles. So things may gain by being diminished and lose by being increased (损, 益). The chapter ends with a saying that others also teach, that the violent do not die a natural death, and the speaker makes it the father, the starting point, of his teaching.

第四十三章 Chapter 43

The softest thing

tiān xià zhī zhì róu　　chí chěng tiān xià zhī zhì jiān
天下之至柔，驰骋天下之至坚。

The softest thing in the world runs through the hardest thing in the world.

wú yǒu rù wú jiàn
无有入无间，

What has no substance enters where there is no gap.

wú shì yǐ zhī wú wéi zhī yǒu yì
吾是以知无为之有益。

From this I know the benefit of non-action.

bù yán zhī jiào　　wú wéi zhī yì
不言之教，无为之益，

Teaching without words, the benefit of non-action:

tiān xià xī jí zhī
天下希及之。

few in the world attain them.

Meaning

Chapter 43 finds the case for non-action in a plain observation: what is soft gets through what is hard.

Its first image is of something soft galloping through something hard: the softest thing in the world runs through the hardest. The text does not name it. Wang Bi gives breath (气) and water as examples, and chapter 78 says that nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water, yet for attacking the hard and strong nothing surpasses it. The second line goes further: what has no substance (无有)

enters where there is no gap. From these observations the speaker draws the benefit of 无为, non-action.

The chapter is short and ends with a reflection: teaching without words and the benefit of non-action are things few in the world attain. Teaching without words (不言之教) comes from chapter 2, where the sage "puts himself in a position of non-active productive state, carries out unspoken guidance." The theme of the soft overcoming the hard links the chapter to chapters 36, 76 and 78.

第四十四章 Chapter 44

Fame or life

míng yǔ shēn shú qīn
名与身孰亲？

Fame or your life: which is dearer?

shēn yǔ huò shú duō
身与货孰多？

Your life or your goods: which is worth more?

dé yǔ wáng shú bìng
得与亡孰病？

Gain or loss: which does more harm?

shì gù shèn ài bì dà fèi
是故甚爱必大费，

So great attachment is sure to cost much,

duō cáng bì hòu wáng zhī zú bù rǔ
多藏必厚亡，知足不辱，

and great hoarding is sure to bring heavy loss. Knowing what is enough, you are not disgraced;

zhī zhǐ bù dài kě yǐ cháng jiǔ
知止不殆，可以长久。

knowing when to stop, you are not in danger, and can last long.

Meaning

Chapter 44 asks what a person gives up in chasing fame and wealth, and finds safety in knowing where to stop.

It opens with three questions. Fame or your life: which is dearer? Your life or your goods: which is worth more? Gain or loss: which does more harm? The

questions answer themselves, and the third turns the usual view around: gaining can hurt more than losing. 身, translated here as "your life", means the whole person, body and self together.

The second half gives the reason in two lines. Great attachment is sure to cost much, and great hoarding is sure to bring heavy loss. Then the remedy: knowing what is enough (知足), you are not disgraced; knowing when to stop (知止), you are not in danger and can last long. The two phrases join chapters 32 and 33, and chapter 46 says that no disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough. Chapter 13 also asks what one's own person is worth beside the world.

第四十五章 Chapter 45

Great perfection seems lacking

dà chéng ruò quē qí yòng bù bì
大成若缺，其用不弊。

Great completion seems lacking, yet its use never wears out.

dà yíng ruò chōng qí yòng bù qióng
大盈若冲，其用不穷。

Great fullness seems empty, yet its use is never exhausted.

dà zhí ruò qū
大直若屈，

Great straightness seems bent,

dà qiǎo ruò zhuō
大巧若拙，

great skill seems clumsy,

dà biàn ruò nè
大辩若讷。

great eloquence seems to stammer.

zào shèng hán jìng shèng rè
躁胜寒，静胜热。

Movement overcomes cold; stillness overcomes heat.

qīng jìng wéi tiān xià zhèng
清静为天下正。

Clear and still, one sets the world right.

Meaning

Chapter 45 returns to the paradoxes of chapter 41, this time to say that what looks flawed is what serves best.

Each line pairs a quality with its seeming flaw. Great completion seems lacking, yet its use (用) never wears out; great fullness seems empty, yet its use is never exhausted. Three shorter pairs follow: great straightness seems bent, great skill seems clumsy, great eloquence seems to stammer. Some editions of the Wang Bi text, including the one the site checks against, add a phrase on the use of each of these three (其用不居, 其用不辍, 其用不差); the usual Wang Bi text, the silk manuscripts and Heshang Gong do not have them, and neither does the recitation, so the site leaves them out. Great fullness that seems empty (冲) recalls the opening of chapter 4: "The Way is empty, yet used, it never fills up."

The last lines are harder. Movement overcomes cold and stillness overcomes heat, as a body warms by moving and cools by resting. Some modern editors rearrange the words so that stillness overcomes agitation; the site keeps the received order. The chapter ends on stillness: clear and still (清静), one sets the world right, as in chapter 37 the world settles of itself.

第四十六章 Chapter 46

Knowing what is enough

tiān xià yǒu dào　　què zǒu mǎ yǐ fèn
天下有道，却走马以粪。

When the world has the Way, galloping horses are sent back to manure the fields.

tiān xià wú dào　　róng mǎ shēng yú jiāo
天下无道，戎马生于郊。

When the world lacks the Way, warhorses are born on the borders.

huò mò dà yú bù zhī zú
祸莫大于不知足；

No disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough;

jiù mò dà yú yù dé
咎莫大于欲得。

no fault is greater than wanting to gain.

gù zhī zú zhī zú　　cháng zú yǐ
故知足之足，常足矣。

So the contentment of knowing what is enough is lasting contentment.

Meaning

Chapter 46 traces war and peace back to a single habit of mind: whether people know what is enough.

The opening is a pair of images about horses. When the world has the Way, galloping horses are sent back to manure the fields; when it lacks the Way, warhorses are born on the borders. The second line is read in more than one way: 郊 can mean the outskirts of a city or the frontier, and some take the line to mean that even mares in foal go to war and give birth in the open. Either way, the horses show the state of a whole country.

The chapter then names the cause. No disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough (不知足), and no fault is greater than wanting to gain. Several editions add a line on desire before these (罪莫大于可欲); Wang Bi's text does not have it. The conclusion plays on 足, enough: the contentment of knowing what is enough is lasting contentment. Chapters 33 and 44 make the same point, and chapter 30 describes the war that follows when it is forgotten.

第四十七章 Chapter 47

Without going out of the door

bù chū hù zhī tiān xià
不出户，知天下；

Without going out of the door, one knows the world;

bù kuī yǒu jiàn tiān dào
不窥牖，见天道。

without looking out of the window, one sees the Way of heaven.

qí chū mí yuǎn qí zhī mí shǎo
其出弥远，其知弥少。

The farther one goes, the less one knows.

shì yǐ shèng rén bù xíng ér zhī
是以圣人不行而知，

So the sage knows without going,

bù jiàn ér míng
不见而名，

names without seeing,

bù wéi ér chéng
不为而成。

and achieves without acting.

Meaning

Chapter 47 is about knowledge that does not depend on travel or on seeing for oneself.

The images are domestic: the door and the window. Without going out of the door one knows the world; without looking out of the window one sees the Way of heaven (天道). Then comes the line that surprises most readers: the farther

one goes, the less one knows. The chapter is not against travel as such; it says that what matters is not found by collecting more and more from outside, a point chapter 48 makes about learning.

The conclusion describes the sage in three short phrases: he knows without going, names without seeing, and achieves without acting. Some editions write 明, to understand, for 名, to name; Wang Bi keeps 名 and explains that one who grasps how things come about can name right and wrong without seeing them, and the site follows him. The last phrase is another form of 无为, non-action. Chapter 54 ends on a similar question: "How do I know the world is so?"

第四十八章 Chapter 48

Losing every day

wéi xué rì yì wéi dào rì sǔn
为学日益，为道日损。

Pursuing learning, one gains every day; pursuing the Way, one loses every day.

sǔn zhī yòu sǔn yǐ zhì yú wú wéi
损之又损，以至于无为。

Losing and losing again, one arrives at non-action.

wú wéi ér wú bù wéi
无为而无不为。

With non-action, nothing is left undone.

qǔ tiān xià cháng yǐ wú shì
取天下常以无事，

One wins the world by constantly leaving it alone;

jí qí yǒu shì bù zú yǐ qǔ tiān xià
及其有事，不足以取天下。

as soon as one meddles, one is not fit to win the world.

Meaning

Chapter 48 says the Way is followed by taking away rather than adding, first in oneself and then in governing.

Pursuing learning (为学), one gains daily; pursuing the Way (为道), one loses daily. The losing goes on until it reaches 无为, non-action, and the chapter takes up the words of chapter 37: "yet nothing is left undone". What is lost is not named. The context suggests the habits, plans and interventions that pile up with effort, rather than knowledge as such; chapter 47 has just said that the farther one goes, the less one knows.

The last lines apply this to government. One wins the world by constantly leaving it alone (无事); as soon as one meddles, one is not fit to win it. 取天下 can mean taking the world or governing it, and Heshang Gong glosses 取 as 治, to govern; the site's translation keeps the simpler word, to win. Chapter 57 uses the same phrase, win the world by leaving it alone, and chapter 29 warns that whoever wishes to take the world and run it will not succeed.

第四十九章 Chapter 49

The people's mind

shèng rén wú cháng xīn
圣人无常心，

The sage has no fixed mind of his own;

yǐ bǎi xìng xīn wéi xīn
以百姓心为心。

he makes the people's mind his mind.

shàn zhě wú shàn zhī
善者，吾善之；

To the good, I am good;

bù shàn zhě wú yì shàn zhī dé shàn
不善者，吾亦善之，德善。

to those who are not good, I am also good, and so goodness is gained.

xìn zhě wú xìn zhī
信者，吾信之；

The trustworthy I trust;

bù xìn zhě wú yì xìn zhī dé xìn
不信者，吾亦信之，德信。

the untrustworthy I also trust, and so trust is gained.

shèng rén zài tiān xià xī xī
圣人在天下歙歙，

The sage in the world draws himself in,

wèi tiān xià hún qí xīn
为天下浑其心，

and for the world's sake keeps his mind undivided;

shèng rén jiē hái zhī
圣人皆孩之。

the sage sees all the people as his children.

Meaning

Chapter 49 shows how the sage stands toward the people: his goodness and his trust do not depend on how each of them behaves.

The sage makes the people's mind his mind. To the good he is good, and to those who are not good he is also good; the trustworthy he trusts, and the untrustworthy he also trusts. In 德善 and 德信 the character 德 is read as 得, to gain, as some editions write it and as the site's glossary notes: in this way goodness is gained, and trust is gained. The point is not that the sage cannot tell good from bad, but that he withholds goodness from no one; chapter 27 says in the same spirit that the sage "always elevates people, and doesn't ostracize others."

The last lines show the sage among the people. He draws himself in, keeps his mind undivided (浑) for the world's sake, and sees all the people as his children (孩之). The received text has one more phrase between these, 百姓皆注其耳目, the people all turn their eyes and ears toward him; the recitation does not include it, so the page leaves it out, and the translation of the last line names the people itself. The child, like the infant and the newborn of chapters 20, 28 and 55, is a model in this book, not a lesser state.

第五十章 Chapter 50

Into life, into death

chū shēng rù sǐ
出生入死。

Coming out into life, going into death.

shēng zhī tú, shí yǒu sān;
生之徒，十有三；

Those who follow life are three in ten;

sǐ zhī tú, shí yǒu sān;
死之徒，十有三；

those who follow death are three in ten;

rén zhī shēng,
人之生，

and people who live

dòng zhī sǐ dì,
动之死地，

but move toward the place of death

yì shí yǒu sān.
亦十有三。

are also three in ten.

fú hé gù?
夫何故？

Why is this?

yǐ qí shēngshēng zhī hòu.
以其生生之厚。

Because they cling too hard to living.

gài wén shàn shè shēng zhě lù xíng bù yù sì hǔ
盖闻善摄生者，陆行不遇兕虎，

I have heard that one who nurtures life well walks the land without meeting rhinos or tigers,

rù jūn bù pī jiǎ bīng
入军不被甲兵；

and goes into battle without armor or weapons;

sì wú suǒ tóu qí jiǎo hǔ wú suǒ cuò qí zhǎo
兕无所投其角，虎无所措其爪，

the rhino finds nowhere to drive its horn, the tiger nowhere to set its claws,

bīng wú suǒ róng qí rèn
兵无所容其刃。

the weapon nowhere to lodge its blade.

fú hé gù
夫何故？

Why is this?

yǐ qí wú sǐ dì
以其无死地。

Because he has no place of death in him.

Meaning

Chapter 50 is a reckoning of how people live and die, and of the rare one whom death cannot reach.

It opens with four characters, 出生入死: coming out into life, going into death. Then come three groups, each 十有三. The site follows Wang Bi in reading this as three in ten: three in ten follow life, three in ten follow death, and three in ten live but move toward the place of death. Han Fei read the same words as thirteen, the four limbs and nine openings of the body; Legge, like the site, has

three in ten. The third group, the chapter says, clings too hard to living (生生之厚), a phrase close to one in chapter 75.

The second half is an image of safety. One who nurtures life well (善摄生) walks the land without meeting rhinos or tigers and goes into battle without armor or weapons; the rhino finds nowhere to drive its horn, the tiger nowhere to set its claws, the weapon nowhere to lodge its blade, because he has no place of death in him. Chapter 55 gives a similar picture: the newborn child, whom wasps, scorpions and snakes do not sting and wild beasts do not seize.

第五十一章 Chapter 51

The Way gives life

dào shēng zhī dé xù zhī wù xíng zhī
道生之，德畜之，物形之，

The Way gives them life, virtue nourishes them, things shape them,

shì chéng zhī
势成之。

circumstance completes them.

shì yǐ wàn wù mò bù zūn dào ér guì dé
是以万物莫不尊道而贵德。

So among the myriad things none fails to honor the Way and value virtue.

dào zhī zūn dé zhī guì fú mò zhī mìng ér cháng zì rán
道之尊，德之贵，夫莫之命而常自然。

The Way is honored and virtue valued not by anyone's command, but always of themselves.

gù dào shēng zhī dé xù zhī
故道生之，德畜之。

So the Way gives them life and virtue nourishes them.

zhǎng zhī yù zhī tíng zhī dú zhī
长之育之，亭之毒之，

It raises them and rears them, shapes them and ripens them,

yǎng zhī fù zhī
养之覆之。

nurtures them and protects them.

shēng ér bù yǒu
生而不有，

It lives without possessing,

wéi ér bù shì
为而不恃，

acts without expecting,

zhǎng ér bù zǎi
长而不宰。

leads without domineering.

shì wèi xuán dé
是谓玄德。

This is called mysterious virtue.

Meaning

Chapter 51 follows all things from birth to completion, and says why they honor the Way and virtue.

The first lines name four stages: the Way gives things life, virtue (德) nourishes them, things give them shape, and circumstance completes them. That is why all things honor the Way and value virtue, and the chapter stresses that this honor is not commanded but comes of itself (自然). The care is then spelled out in a run of verbs: raising, rearing, shaping, ripening, nurturing, protecting. 亭之毒之 is the hard phrase, since 毒 usually means poison; Wang Bi's note speaks of completing what is real in them, Heshang Gong's text writes 成之孰之, completing and ripening, and the site's "shapes them and ripens them" follows that line of reading. In line 7 the site follows the recitation's 养之覆之, nurtures them and protects them, where Wang Bi's text has 盖之覆之.

The ending repeats lines from chapters 2 and 10: it lives without possessing, acts without expecting, leads without domineering. This is called 玄德, mysterious virtue, a phrase that also closes chapter 10 and returns in chapter 65. Chapter 34 says much the same of the great Way.

第五十二章 Chapter 52

The mother of the world

tiān xià yǒu shǐ yǐ wéi tiān xià mǔ
天下有始，以为天下母。

The world has a beginning, which is the mother of the world.

jì dé qí mǔ yǐ zhī qí zǐ，
既得其母，以知其子，

Having found the mother, one knows the children;

jì zhī qí zǐ fù shǒu qí mǔ，
既知其子，复守其母，

knowing the children, one holds again to the mother,

mò shēn bù dài
没身不殆。

and to the end of one's life there is no danger.

sè qí duì，
塞其兑，

Close the openings,

bì qí mén zhōngshēn bù qín
闭其门，终身不勤。

shut the doors, and all your life you will not be worn out.

kāi qí duì，
开其兑，

Open the openings,

jì qí shì zhōngshēn bù jiù
济其事，终身不救。

busy yourself with affairs, and all your life you cannot be saved.

jiàn xiǎo yuē míng　　shǒu róu yuē qiáng
见小曰明，守柔曰强。

Seeing the small is called clarity; keeping to the soft is called strength.

yòng qí guāng　　fù guī qí míng
用其光，复归其明，

Use the light and return to clarity,

wú yí shēn yāng　　shì wéi xí cháng
无遗身殃，是为习常。

bring no harm upon yourself: this is called following the constant.

Meaning

Chapter 52 joins two ideas: knowing the world by holding to its source, and guarding the senses so that life is not worn out.

The first lines use the image of mother and children. The world has a beginning, which is the mother of the world; having found the mother, one knows the children, and knowing the children, one holds again to the mother, and to the end of one's life there is no danger. The mother recalls chapter 1, where the named is the mother of the myriad things, and chapter 25.

The middle lines are about the senses. Close the openings (兑) and shut the doors, and all your life you will not be worn out; open the openings, busy yourself with affairs, and all your life you cannot be saved. Chapter 56 repeats the first pair. The chapter then defines two terms: seeing the small is called clarity (明), and keeping to the soft (柔) is called strength. It ends with using the light and returning to clarity, which is called following the constant. Wang Bi's text writes 习常; other editions have 袭常, like 袭明 in chapter 27, and the site reads both as following or practicing the constant.

第五十三章 Chapter 53

The great Way is smooth

shǐ wǒ jiè rán yǒu zhī　　xíng yú dà dào
使我介然有知，行于大道，

If I had the least knowledge, walking on the great Way,

wéi shī shì wèi
唯施是畏。

my only fear would be to stray from it.

dà dào shèn yí　　ér mín hào jìng
大道甚夷，而民好径。

The great Way is very smooth, yet people love side paths.

cháo shèn chú
朝甚除，

The court is spotless,

tián shèn wú　　cāng shèn xū
田甚芜，仓甚虚；

while the fields are full of weeds and the granaries empty;

fú wén cǎi
服文彩，

they wear embroidered robes,

dài lì jiàn　　yàn yǐn shí
带利剑，厌饮食，

carry sharp swords, are sated with food and drink,

cái huò yǒu yú
财货有余；

and have wealth to spare:

shì wéi dào kuā
是为盗夸。

this is called the boasting of robbers.

fēi dào yě zāi
非道也哉！

This is not the Way!

Meaning

Chapter 53 is about leaving the Way, first as the fear of straying from a road, then in a picture of a court in luxury beside empty granaries.

It opens in the first person: if I had the least knowledge, walking on the great Way, my only fear would be to stray from it. This line is read in two ways. Wang Bi takes 施 as acting or doing, so the fear is of meddling; the site's translation follows the reading of 施 as 迤, to go astray, proposed by later philologists such as Wang Niansun. The next line keeps the image of the road: the great Way is very smooth, yet people love side paths.

The second half is one of the most concrete social pictures in the book. The court is spotless while the fields are full of weeds and the granaries empty; those in power wear embroidered robes, carry sharp swords, are sated with food and drink and have wealth to spare. This is called 盗夸, the boasting of robbers, and the chapter ends with a rare exclamation: this is not the Way! Chapters 75 and 77 make similar charges against rulers who take too much.

第五十四章 Chapter 54

Well planted

shàn jiàn zhě bù bá
善建者不拔，

What is well planted cannot be uprooted,

shàn bào zhě bù tuō
善抱者不脱，

what is well held cannot slip away,

zǐ sūn yǐ jì sì bù chuò
子孙以祭祀不辍。

and children and grandchildren will keep up the offerings without end.

xiū zhī yú shēn　　qí dé nǎi zhēn
修之于身，其德乃真；

Cultivate it in yourself, and virtue will be genuine;

xiū zhī yú jiā　　qí dé nǎi yú
修之于家，其德乃余；

cultivate it in the family, and virtue will be abundant;

xiū zhī yú xiāng　　qí dé nǎi cháng
修之于乡，其德乃长；

cultivate it in the village, and virtue will last;

xiū zhī yú guó　　qí dé nǎi fēng
修之于国，其德乃丰；

cultivate it in the state, and virtue will flourish;

xiū zhī yú tiān xià　　qí dé nǎi pǔ
修之于天下，其德乃普。

cultivate it in the world, and virtue will be everywhere.

gù yǐ shēn guān shēn yǐ jiā guān jiā
故以身观身，以家观家，

So observe the self through the self, the family through the family,

yǐ xiāng guān xiāng yǐ guó guān guó
以乡观乡，以国观国，

the village through the village, the state through the state,

yǐ tiān xià guān tiān xià
以天下观天下。

the world through the world.

wú hé yǐ zhī tiān xià zhī rán zāi yǐ cǐ
吾何以知天下之然哉？以此。

How do I know the world is so? By this.

Meaning

Chapter 54 is about what lasts, and how it reaches from one person to the whole world.

It begins with two images of firmness: what is well planted cannot be uprooted, and what is well held cannot slip away, so that children and grandchildren keep up the ancestral offerings without end. Then comes a ladder of five steps: cultivate it in yourself, and virtue will be genuine; cultivate it in the family, and virtue will be abundant; and so on through the village and the state to the world, where virtue will be everywhere. What is cultivated (之) is not named; what it brings is virtue. Readers often compare this ladder with the sequence of self, family, state and world in the Confucian Great Learning (大学).

The last lines turn the ladder into a way of knowing: observe the self through the self, the family through the family, and so on up to the world through the world. One reading is that each level is understood on its own terms rather than measured against another. The chapter ends with a question and a short answer, how do I know the world is so? By this, a formula also found in chapters 21 and

57. Chapter 47 likewise speaks of knowing the world without going out of the door.

第五十五章 Chapter 55

Like a newborn child

hán dé zhī hòu bǐ yú chì zǐ
含德之厚，比于赤子。

One who holds virtue in fullness is like a newborn child.

fēng chài huǐ shé bù shì měng shòu bù jù
蜂虿虺蛇不螫，猛兽不据，

Wasps, scorpions and snakes do not sting him, wild beasts do not seize him,

jué niǎo bù bó
攫鸟不搏。

birds of prey do not strike him.

gǔ ruò jīn róu ér wò gù
骨弱筋柔而握固。

His bones are weak, his sinews soft, yet his grip is firm.

wèi zhī pìn mǔ zhī hé ér zuī zuò
未知牝牡之合而朘作，

He knows nothing of the union of male and female, yet his member stirs:

jīng zhī zhì yě
精之至也。

this is vital essence at its height.

zhōng rì háo ér bù shà hé zhī zhì yě
终日号而不嗄，和之至也。

He cries all day without growing hoarse: this is harmony at its height.

zhī hé yuē cháng zhī cháng yuē míng
知和曰常，知常曰明。

Knowing harmony is called the constant; knowing the constant is called brilliance.

yì shēng yuē xiáng
益生曰祥。

Forcing life is called ill-omened.

xīn shǐ qì yuē qiáng
心使气曰强。

The mind driving the breath is called forcing.

wù zhuàng zé lǎo
物壮则老，

Things with strength ultimately wither,

shì wèi bù dào
是谓不道，

this is not the Way,

bù dào zǎo yǐ
不道早已。

and what is not the Way soon ends.

Meaning

Chapter 55 is about the vitality that comes with softness, and about forcing, which makes things wither. One who holds virtue in fullness is like a newborn child: stinging insects, wild beasts and birds of prey leave him alone; his bones are weak, his sinews soft, yet his grip is firm, and he cries all day without growing hoarse. The text sees two things at their height in the child: vital essence (精) and harmony (和).

The second half turns from the image to a warning. Knowing harmony is called the constant, and knowing the constant is brilliance, words that echo chapter 16.

Against this stands forcing: trying to add to life, or letting the mind drive the breath. The last three lines repeat the end of chapter 30: things with strength ultimately wither, and what is not the Way soon ends.

Two lines are read in different ways. In line 5, Wang Bi's text has 全, which he takes as "whole"; other editions write 朘 (zuī), the infant's member, which is what the recitation says, and the site follows it. In line 9, 祥 usually means a good omen, but here, as Wang Bi reads it, it is an ill one: adding to life cuts it short.

第五十六章 Chapter 56

Those who know do not speak

zhī zhě bù yán　　yán zhě bù zhī
知者不言，言者不知。

Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know.

sè qí duì　　bì qí mén　　cuò qí ruì
塞其兑，闭其门，挫其锐，

Close the openings, shut the doors, blunt sharpness,

jiě qí fēn　　hé qí guāng　　tóng qí chén
解其分，和其光，同其尘，

untangle knots, soften the glare, combine the elements:

shì wèi xuán tóng
是谓玄同。

this is called mysterious oneness.

gù bù kě dé ér qīn
故不可得而亲，

So one cannot draw near to it,

bù kě dé ér shū
不可得而疏；

nor hold it at a distance;

bù kě dé ér lì　　bù kě dé ér hài
不可得而利，不可得而害；

one cannot benefit it, nor harm it;

bù kě dé ér guì　　bù kě dé ér jiàn
不可得而贵，不可得而贱。

one cannot honor it, nor debase it.

gù wéi tiān xià guì
故为天下贵。

So it is the most valued in the world.

Meaning

Chapter 56 is about a knowing that does not put itself into words, and about blending with the world instead of standing apart from it. It opens with one of the book's most quoted lines: those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know.

The middle lines gather phrases found elsewhere. Closing the openings and shutting the doors comes from chapter 52; blunting sharpness, untangling knots, softening the glare and combining the elements repeat the Chinese of chapter 4. Together they are called 玄同 (mysterious oneness). Then come three pairs: one cannot draw near to it, nor hold it at a distance; one cannot benefit it, nor harm it; one cannot honor it, nor debase it. So it is the most valued in the world, the same closing words as chapter 62.

In line 3, Wang Bi's text writes 分, "division"; the site reads it as 纷, "tangles", the character chapter 4 has in the same phrase. The "it" of the last lines may be the person who has reached this oneness or the oneness itself; the translation leaves both open.

第五十七章 Chapter 57

Laws and disorder

yǐ zhèng zhì guó　　yǐ qí yòng bīng
以正治国，以奇用兵，

Govern the state by what is upright; wage war by surprise;

yǐ wú shì qǔ tiān xià
以无事取天下。

win the world by leaving it alone.

wú hé yǐ zhī qí rán zāi？　yǐ cǐ
吾何以知其然哉？以此。

How do I know it is so? By this:

tiān xià duō jì huì
天下多忌讳，

the more prohibitions in the world,

ér mín mí pín
而民弥贫；

the poorer the people;

mín duō lì qì　　guó jiā zī hūn
民多利器，国家滋昏；

the more sharp tools the people have, the more the state falls into confusion;

rén duō jì qiǎo
人多伎巧，

the more skill and cunning people have,

qí wù zī qǐ
奇物滋起；

the more strange things appear;

fǎ lìng zī zhāng dào zéi duō yǒu
法令滋彰，盗贼多有。

the more laws and orders are displayed, the more thieves and robbers there are.

gù shèng rén yún
故圣人云：

So the sage says:

wǒ wú wéi ér mín zì huà
“我无为而民自化，

"I do not act, and the people transform of themselves;

wǒ hào jìng ér mín zì zhèng
我好静而民自正，

I love stillness, and the people become upright of themselves;

wǒ wú shì ér mín zì fù
我无事而民自富，

I leave things alone, and the people grow rich of themselves;

wǒ wú yù ér mín zì pǔ
我无欲而民自朴。”

I have no desires, and the people become simple of themselves."

Meaning

Chapter 57 argues that a state is best governed by doing less. It opens with three methods set side by side: govern the state by what is upright, wage war by surprise, but win the world by leaving it alone (无事), a phrase also found in chapter 48.

The proof is a list of measures that backfire. More prohibitions make the people poorer; more sharp tools bring more confusion; more skill and cunning breed more strange things; more laws and orders produce more thieves and robbers. Each step meant to create order adds to the disorder.

The chapter ends with the sage speaking in the first person, in four parallel lines. He does not act (无为), loves stillness, leaves things alone and has no desires, and each time the people do the rest of themselves: they transform, become upright, grow rich and become simple. The last word, 朴, is the uncarved block of chapters 28 and 32. Chapter 75 makes the same case from the other side, listing what goes wrong when those above meddle.

第五十八章 Chapter 58

Fortune and misfortune

qí zhèng mèn mèn qí mín chún chún
其政闷闷，其民淳淳；

When government is dull and quiet, the people are simple and honest;

qí zhèng chá chá qí mín quē quē
其政察察，其民缺缺。

when government is sharp and prying, the people are discontented.

huò xī fú zhī suǒ yǐ
祸兮福之所倚，

Misfortune is what fortune leans on;

fú xī huò zhī suǒ fú
福兮祸之所伏。

fortune is where misfortune hides.

shú zhī qí jí qí wú zhèng
孰知其极？其无正。

Who knows where it ends? There is no fixed rule.

zhèng fù wéi qí shàn fù wéi yāo
正复为奇，善复为妖。

The upright turns again into the strange; the good turns again into the ill-omened.

rén zhī mí qí rì gù jiǔ
人之迷，其日固久。

People have been lost in this for a long time.

shì yǐ shèng rén fāng ér bù gē
是以圣人方而不割，

So the sage is square but does not cut,

lián ér bù guì zhí ér bù sì
廉而不刿， 直而不肆，

sharp-edged but does not wound, straight but not overbearing,

guāng ér bù yào
光而不燿。

bright but does not dazzle.

Meaning

Chapter 58 is about how things turn into their opposites, in government and in fortune. It begins with two kinds of rule: a government that is dull and quiet keeps the people simple and honest, while one that is sharp and prying leaves them discontented.

Then the chapter widens. Misfortune is what fortune leans on, and fortune is where misfortune hides. No one knows where the turning ends, and there is no fixed rule: the upright becomes strange again, the good becomes ill-omened again, and people have long been lost in this. The idea that each state carries its opposite runs through the book, from chapter 2 on; in chapter 40, returning is the movement of the Way.

The sage's answer is four balanced qualities: square but not cutting, sharp-edged but not wounding, straight but not overbearing, bright but not dazzling. He has edges and light, but does not turn them on others, much as chapters 4 and 56 speak of softening the glare (和其光). In line 5, 其无正 is short and has been punctuated in more than one way; the site reads it as a statement that there is no fixed rule.

第五十九章 Chapter 59

Frugality

zhì rén shì tiān mò ruò sè
治人事天，莫若啬。

In governing people and serving heaven, nothing is better than frugality.

fú wéi sè shì wèi zǎo fú
夫唯啬，是谓早服；

Being frugal means submitting early;

zǎo fú wèi zhī chóng jī dé
早服谓之重积德；

submitting early means accumulating virtue again and again;

chóng jī dé zé wú bù kè
重积德则无不克，

for one who accumulates virtue again and again, there is nothing that cannot be overcome;

wú bù kè zé mò zhī qí jí
无不克则莫知其极；

when there is nothing that cannot be overcome, no one knows his limits;

mò zhī qí jí kě yǐ yǒu guó
莫知其极，可以有国；

when no one knows his limits, he can hold a state;

yǒu guó zhī mǔ kě yǐ cháng jiǔ
有国之母，可以长久；

holding the mother of the state, one can last long.

shì wèi shēn gēn gù dǐ chángshēng jiǔ shì zhī dào
是谓深根固柢，长生久视之道。

This is called deep roots and a firm base, the Way of long life and lasting sight.

Meaning

Chapter 59 is about 啬 (frugality), which here means being sparing with one's strength and resources. The character is related to 穡, gathering in the harvest, and the chapter keeps that sense of storing up rather than spending.

The argument is a chain in which each step leads to the next. Being frugal means submitting early; submitting early means accumulating virtue again and again; for one who does so, there is nothing that cannot be overcome; then no one knows his limits, and he can hold a state. Holding the mother of the state, one can last long. The chapter ends with two images: deep roots and a firm base, and the Way of long life and lasting sight (长生久视).

Line 2 is read in different ways. 早服 can mean "to submit early", or, taking 服 as 复, "to return early", which is how Legge rendered it. The site follows Wang Bi, who glosses 早服 as 常: submitting early to the constant. Frugality returns as one of the three treasures in chapter 67, and the root as the place of return in chapter 16.

第六十章 Chapter 60

Cooking a small fish

zhì dà guó ruò pēng xiǎo xiān
治大国，若烹小鲜。

Govern a great state as you would cook a small fish.

yǐ dào lì tiān xià qí guǐ bù shén
以道莅天下，其鬼不神；

When the Way presides over the world, ghosts have no power;

fēi qí guǐ bù shén qí shén bù shāng rén
非其鬼不神，其神不伤人；

not that ghosts have no power, but their power does not harm people;

fēi qí shén bù shāng rén shèng rén yì bù shāng rén
非其神不伤人，圣人亦不伤人。

not that their power alone does not harm people; the sage, too, does not harm people.

fú liǎng bù xiāngshāng gù dé jiāo guī yān
夫两不相伤，故德交归焉。

Since neither does harm, their virtue flows back to the people.

Meaning

Chapter 60 is about ruling with a light hand, and what that does to the power of ghosts and spirits. It opens with one of the book's best-known images: govern a great state as you would cook a small fish. A small fish falls apart if it is turned and stirred too often, and a state is spoiled in the same way by too much handling.

The rest of the chapter speaks of ghosts and spirits. When the Way presides over the world, ghosts have no power; or rather, they keep their power, but it does not harm people; or rather still, the sage, too, does not harm people. The argument

steps back twice with 非 ("not that") and comes to rest on the ruler. Since neither the spirits nor the sage do harm, virtue (德) flows back to the people.

The chapter belongs with others on governing lightly, such as chapter 57, where the sage says "I leave things alone, and the people grow rich of themselves", and chapter 29, which calls the world a sacred vessel that cannot be acted upon. The last line, 德交归焉, is terse and is read in several ways; the house translation takes it as the virtue of both returning to the people.

第六十一章 Chapter 61

The lower place

dà guó zhě xià liú
大国者下流，

A great state is like the lower course of a river,

tiān xià zhī jiāo
天下之交。

where the whole world meets.

tiān xià zhī pìn， pìn cháng yǐ jìng shèng mǔ
天下之牝，牝常以静胜牡，

It is the female of the world. The female always overcomes the male by stillness;

yǐ jìng wéi xià
以静为下。

by stillness she takes the lower place.

gù dà guó yǐ xià xiǎo guó
故大国以下小国，

So when a great state places itself below a small state,

zé qǔ xiǎo guó；
则取小国；

it wins the small state;

xiǎo guó yǐ xià dà guó， zé qǔ dà guó。
小国以下大国，则取大国。

when a small state places itself below a great state, it wins the great state.

gù huò xià yǐ qǔ
故或下以取，

So one wins by lowering itself,

huò xià ér qǔ
或下而取。

the other wins by being low.

dà guó bù guò yù jiān xù rén
大国不过欲兼畜人，

A great state wants nothing more than to unite and nourish people;

xiǎo guó bù guò yù rù shì rén
小国不过欲入事人。

a small state wants nothing more than to join and serve others.

fú liǎng zhě gè dé qí suǒ yù
夫两者各得其所欲，

For both to get what they want,

dà zhě yí wéi xià
大者宜为下。

the great one should take the lower place.

Meaning

Chapter 61 turns to how states, great and small, should deal with one another. It compares the great state to the lower course of a river, where the whole world meets, and to the female, who always overcomes the male by stillness and by stillness takes the lower place.

The middle of the chapter is built as a careful symmetry. A great state that places itself below a small state wins it; a small state that places itself below a great one wins it in turn. One wins by lowering itself, the other by being low. Each wants something modest: the great state, to unite and nourish people; the small one, to

join and serve. The closing line puts the burden on the stronger side: the great one should take the lower place.

The images link to others in the book: the mystic female (玄牝) of chapter 6, abiding by femininity in chapter 28, and the rivers and seas of chapter 66, which can be kings of the hundred valleys because they are good at being below them. 下流 in line 1 is read here as "the lower course", not in its later sense of "base" or "vulgar".

第六十二章 Chapter 62

The refuge of all things

dào zhě wàn wù zhī ào
道者万物之奥。

The Way is the hidden refuge of the myriad things,

shàn rén zhī bǎo　　bù shàn rén zhī suǒ bǎo
善人之宝，不善人之所保。

the treasure of the good, and what keeps the not-good safe.

měi yán kě yǐ shì　　zūn xíng kě yǐ jiā rén
美言可以市，尊行可以加人。

Fine words can be sold; noble deeds can raise a person up.

rén zhī bù shàn　　hé qì zhī yǒu
人之不善，何弃之有？

Even if people are not good, why cast them away?

gù lì tiān zǐ　　zhì sān gōng
故立天子，置三公，

So when the Son of Heaven is enthroned and the three ministers appointed,

suī yǒu gǒng bì yǐ xiān sì mǎ
虽有拱璧以先驷马，

even with jade discs held in both hands, followed by teams of four horses,

bù rú zuò jìn cǐ dào
不如坐进此道。

it is better to sit still and offer this Way.

gǔ zhī suǒ yǐ guì cǐ dào zhě hé
古之所以贵此道者何？

Why did the ancients value this Way?

bù yuē qiú yǐ dé yǒu zuì yǐ miǎn yé
不曰求以得，有罪以免邪？

Is it not said: by it, those who seek find, and those who have done wrong are spared?

gù wéi tiān xià guì
故为天下贵。

So it is the most valued in the world.

Meaning

Chapter 62 weighs what people prize (fine words, noble deeds, the gifts of a court) against the Way, which turns no one away. It calls the Way the 奥 of the myriad things: the inner corner of a house, where one is sheltered, translated here as "hidden refuge". It is the treasure of the good, and what keeps the not-good safe.

Fine words can be sold and noble deeds can raise a person up, but the chapter asks: even if people are not good, why cast them away? The thought is close to chapter 27, where the sage "doesn't ostracize others". It then turns to a court ceremony: when the Son of Heaven is enthroned and the three ministers appointed, even with jade discs held in both hands, followed by teams of four horses, it is better to sit still and offer this Way.

The ending asks why the ancients valued the Way and answers with a saying: by it, those who seek find, and those who have done wrong are spared. The site reads 以 in line 9 as "by it", the Way. The last line, "so it is the most valued in the world", repeats the end of chapter 56.

第六十三章 Chapter 63

Acting without acting

wéi wú wéi shì wú shì
为无为，事无事，

Act without acting, work without working,

wèi wú wèi
味无味。

taste without tasting.

dà xiǎo duō shǎo bào yuàn yǐ dé
大小多少，报怨以德。

Treat the small as great and the few as many; repay resentment with virtue.

tú nán yú qí yì wéi dà yú qí xì
图难于其易，为大于其细；

Plan the difficult while it is easy; do the great while it is small.

tiān xià nán shì bì zuò yú yì
天下难事必作于易，

The difficult things of the world always start out easy;

tiān xià dà shì bì zuò yú xì
天下大事必作于细。

the great things of the world always start out small.

shì yǐ shèng rén zhōng bù wéi dà
是以圣人终不为大，

So the sage never does anything great,

gù néngchéng qí dà
故能成其大。

and so he can achieve his greatness.

fú qīng nuò bì guǎ xìn
夫轻诺必寡信，

Light promises always earn little trust;

duō yì ér bì duō nán
多易而必多难。

taking much as easy always brings much difficulty.

shì yǐ shèng rén yóu nán zhī
是以圣人犹难之，

So even the sage treats things as difficult,

gù zhōng wú nán yǐ
故终无难矣。

and so in the end has no difficulty.

Meaning

Chapter 63 is about dealing with things while they are still small and easy. It opens with three paradoxes in one pattern: act without acting (为无为), work without working, taste without tasting. The first of them also appears in chapter 3.

Line 3 is one of the tersest in the book. 大小多少 is literally "great small many few" and has been read in several ways; the site reads it as treating the small as great and the few as many. The same line ends with 报怨以德, "repay resentment with virtue". The Analects records Confucius being asked about this saying and answering that resentment should be repaid with uprightness, and virtue with virtue.

The rest is practical. Plan the difficult while it is easy and do the great while it is small, since everything difficult or great in the world starts out easy or small. So

the sage never does anything great, and so he can achieve his greatness; even the sage treats things as difficult, and so in the end has no difficulty. Chapter 64 carries the theme on with the tree, the tower and the journey of a thousand miles.

第六十四章 Chapter 64

A journey of a thousand li

qí ān yì chí qí wèi zhào yì móu
其安易持，其未兆易谋。

What is at rest is easy to hold; what has not yet appeared is easy to plan for.

qí cuì yì pàn qí wēi yì sàn
其脆易泮，其微易散。

What is brittle is easily broken; what is minute is easily scattered.

wéi zhī yú wèi yǒu
为之于未有，

Deal with things before they exist;

zhì zhī yú wèi luàn
治之于未乱。

put them in order before disorder comes.

hé bào zhī mù
合抱之木，

A tree as wide as your arms can reach

shēng yú háo mò
生于毫末；

grows from a tiny shoot;

jiǔ céng zhī tái
九层之台，

a tower of nine stories

qǐ yú lěi tǔ
起于累土；

rises from a heap of earth;

qiān lǐ zhī xíng shǐ yú zú xià
千里之行，始于足下。

a journey of a thousand miles starts beneath your feet.

wéi zhě bài zhī zhí zhě shī zhī
为者败之，执者失之。

Manipulators spoil it, commanders lose it.

shì yǐ shèng rén wú wéi gù wú bài
是以圣人无为故无败，

So the sage does not act, and so does not spoil;

wú zhí gù wú shī
无执故无失。

does not grasp, and so does not lose.

mín zhī cóng shì cháng yú jī chéng ér bài zhī
民之从事，常于几成而败之。

People at their work often spoil it when it is almost done.

shèn zhōng rú shǐ zé wú bài shì
慎终如始，则无败事。

Be as careful at the end as at the beginning, and nothing will be spoiled.

shì yǐ shèng rén yù bù yù
是以圣人欲不欲，

So the sage desires not to desire,

bù guì nán dé zhī huò
不贵难得之货；

and does not value goods that are hard to get;

xué bù xué fù zhòng rén zhī suǒ guò
学不学，复众人之所过。

he learns not to learn, and brings people back from where they went too far.

yǐ fǔ wàn wù zhī zì rán ér bù gǎn wéi
以辅万物之自然，而不敢为。

He helps the myriad things to be as they are of themselves, and does not dare to act.

Meaning

Chapter 64 carries on from chapter 63: deal with things before they grow. What is at rest is easy to hold and what has not yet appeared is easy to plan for; what is brittle or minute is easily broken or scattered. So deal with things before they exist, and put them in order before disorder comes.

Three images make the point: a tree as wide as your arms can reach grows from a tiny shoot, a tower of nine stories rises from a heap of earth, and a journey of a thousand miles starts beneath your feet. The last has become a common saying, in Chinese and far beyond.

The second half turns the other way. Manipulators spoil it and commanders lose it, lines also found in chapter 29, so the sage neither acts nor grasps. People at their work often spoil it when it is almost done, so be as careful at the end as at the beginning. The chapter closes on 自然 (what is so of itself): the sage helps the myriad things to be as they are of themselves, and does not dare to act. Not valuing goods that are hard to get echoes chapter 3.

第六十五章 Chapter 65

Keeping the people simple

gǔ zhī shàn wéi dào zhě, fēi yǐ míng mín,
古之善为道者，非以明民，

Those of old who were good at the Way did not use it to make the people clever,

jiāng yǐ yú zhī。
将以愚之。

but to keep them simple.

mín zhī nán zhì, yǐ qí zhì duō。
民之难治，以其智多。

People are hard to govern because they are too clever.

gù yǐ zhì zhì guó, guó zhī zéi,
故以智治国，国之贼，

So to govern a state with cleverness is to rob the state;

bù yǐ zhì zhì guó, guó zhī fú。
不以智治国，国之福。

not to govern a state with cleverness is a blessing for the state.

zhī cǐ liǎng zhě yì jī shì。
知此两者亦稽式。

Knowing these two is also knowing the pattern.

cháng zhī jī shì, shì wèi xuán dé。
常知稽式，是谓玄德。

Always knowing the pattern is called mysterious virtue.

xuán dé shēn yǐ　　yuǎn yǐ
玄德深矣，　远矣，

Mysterious virtue is deep, is far-reaching,

yǔ wù fǎn yǐ
与物反矣，

it turns back with all things,

rán hòu nǎi zhì dà shùn
然后乃至大顺。

and then reaches the great harmony.

Meaning

Chapter 65 is about knowledge and government: what a ruler should, and should not, cultivate in the people. Those of old who were good at the Way did not use it to make the people clever, but to keep them simple. People are hard to govern because they are too clever; to govern a state with cleverness is to rob the state, and not to govern it with cleverness is a blessing for the state.

The key word is 愚, which in modern Chinese means "foolish". The house translation renders it "simple", and this is the hardest choice in the chapter; Legge wrote "simple and ignorant". Wang Bi explains 愚 as being without cunning, keeping to what is genuine and following what is so of itself, and chapters 3 and 19 point the same way. The cleverness the chapter rejects (智) is scheming, and line 4 holds it against the ruler as much as the people.

Knowing these two is also knowing the pattern, and always knowing the pattern is called 玄德 (mysterious virtue), the phrase that ends chapters 10 and 51. Such virtue is deep and far-reaching; it turns back with all things, as returning is the movement of the Way in chapter 40, and so reaches the great harmony.

第六十六章 Chapter 66

Rivers and seas

jiāng hǎi suǒ yǐ néng wéi bǎi gǔ zhī wáng zhě
江海所以能为百谷之王者，

Rivers and seas can be kings of the hundred valleys

yǐ qí shàn xià zhī
以其善下之，

because they are good at being below them;

gù néng wéi bǎi gǔ zhī wáng
故能为百谷之王。

so they can be kings of the hundred valleys.

shì yǐ yù shàng mín bì yǐ yán xià zhī
是以欲上民，必以言下之。

So to be above the people, one must speak as one below them;

yù xiān mín bì yǐ shēn hòu zhī
欲先民，必以身后之。

to lead the people, one must put oneself behind them.

shì yǐ shèng rén chǔ shàng ér mín bù zhòng
是以圣人处上而民不重，

So the sage is above, yet the people do not feel his weight;

chǔ qián ér mín bù hài
处前而民不害。

he is in front, yet the people do not feel harmed.

shì yǐ tiān xià lè tuī ér bù yàn
是以天下乐推而不厌，

So the whole world gladly supports him and never tires of him.

yǐ qí bù zhēng gù tiān xià mò néng yǔ zhī zhēng
以其不争，故天下莫能与之争。

Because he does not contend, no one in the world can contend with him.

Meaning

Chapter 66 asks how one can stand above the people without weighing on them. Rivers and seas can be kings of the hundred valleys because they are good at being below them: every stream runs down into them.

The chapter draws the lesson for a ruler in two parallel lines. To be above the people, one must speak as one below them; to lead the people, one must put oneself behind them. So the sage is above, yet the people do not feel his weight; he is in front, yet they do not feel harmed. The whole world gladly supports him and never tires of him.

The last line returns to 不争 (not contending): because he does not contend, no one in the world can contend with him, nearly the same words as chapter 22. Rivers and seas also close chapter 32, the great state takes the lower place in chapter 61, and in chapter 7 the sage puts himself last, and thus is first.

第六十七章 Chapter 67

The three treasures

tiān xià jiē wèi wǒ dào dà
天下皆谓我道大，

Everyone in the world says my Way is great,

sì bù xiào
似不肖。

yet it seems unlike anything.

fú wéi dà gù sì bù xiào
夫唯大，故似不肖。

It is because it is great that it seems unlike anything.

ruò xiào jiǔ yǐ qí xì yě fú
若肖，久矣其细也夫！

If it resembled something, it would long since have become small!

wǒ yǒu sān bǎo chí ér bǎo zhī
我有三宝，持而保之。

I have three treasures, which I hold and keep:

yī yuē cí èr yuē jiǎn
一曰慈，二曰俭，

the first is compassion, the second is frugality,

sān yuē bù gǎn wéi tiān xià xiān
三曰不敢为天下先。

the third is not daring to be first in the world.

cí gù néng yǒng
慈故能勇，

With compassion, one can be brave;

jiǎn gù néngguǎng
俭故能广，

with frugality, one can be generous;

bù gǎn wéi tiān xià xiān
不敢为天下先，

not daring to be first in the world,

gù néngchéng qì zhǎng
故能成器长。

one can become the leader of all.

jīn shě cí qiě yǒng shě jiǎn qiě guǎng
今舍慈且勇，舍俭且广，

Now, to give up compassion yet be brave, to give up frugality yet be generous,

shě hòu qiě xiān sǐ yǐ
舍后且先，死矣！

to give up being last yet be first: this is death!

fú cí yǐ zhàn zé shèng yǐ shǒu zé gù
夫慈以战则胜，以守则固。

With compassion, one wins in battle and holds firm in defense.

tiān jiāng jiù zhī yǐ cí wèi zhī
天将救之，以慈卫之。

When heaven would save someone, it guards him with compassion.

Meaning

Chapter 67 begins with how the speaker's Way looks to others, then names what he holds and keeps. Everyone in the world says it is great, yet it seems unlike anything (不肖), and that is because it is great. If it resembled something, it

would long since have become small. In chapter 25 too, the Way is called "great" only because a name is forced on it.

Then come the three treasures: 慈 (compassion), 俭 (frugality) and not daring to be first in the world. Each makes its apparent opposite possible. With compassion one can be brave, with frugality one can be generous, and, not daring to be first in the world, one can become the leader of all; the word for leader, 器长, is literally "the head of the vessels". To give up compassion yet be brave, frugality yet be generous, being last yet be first: this is death.

The chapter ends with war. With compassion, one wins in battle and holds firm in defense; and when heaven would save someone, it guards him with compassion. This leads into chapters 68 and 69, both about fighting, and chapter 69 warns against losing "my treasures". Frugality was praised already in chapter 59, under the word 啬.

第六十八章 Chapter 68

Not contending

shàn wéi shì zhě bù wǔ
善为士者不武，

A good officer is not warlike;

shàn zhàn zhě bù nù
善战者不怒，

a good fighter is not angry;

shàn shèng dí zhě bù yǔ　　shàn yòng rén zhě wéi zhī xià
善胜敌者不与，善用人者为之下，

one good at defeating enemies does not engage them; one good at using people places himself below them.

shì wèi bù zhēng zhī dé　　shì wèi yòng rén zhī lì
是谓不争之德，是谓用人之力，

This is called the virtue of not contending; this is called using the strength of others;

shì wèi pèi tiān zhī jí
是谓配天之极。

this is called matching heaven, the highest of all.

Meaning

Chapter 68 describes the good warrior by what he does not do. A good officer is not warlike, a good fighter is not angry, one good at defeating enemies does not engage them, and one good at using people places himself below them.

These four clauses, spread over three lines, are then given three names: the virtue of not contending (不争之德), using the strength of others, and matching heaven. Strength that lies in restraint and in taking the lower place joins the

chapters on war to those on government, such as chapter 66, where the sage leads by staying below. 士 here is an officer, not the scholar of chapter 41.

The last line is short and has been read in different ways. Wang Bi's text has 配天古之极, matching heaven, the summit of the ancients; the recitation, like many editions, says 配天之极 without 古, and the site follows it: matching heaven, the highest of all. Chapter 73 says the same of heaven itself, whose Way does not contend yet is good at winning, and chapter 81 ends the book with the Way of the sage, which acts and does not contend.

第六十九章 Chapter 69

The guest, not the host

yòng bīng yǒu yán
用兵有言：

Strategists have a saying:

wú bù gǎn wéi zhǔ ér wéi kè
“吾不敢为主而为客，

"I dare not be the host but rather the guest;

bù gǎn jìn cùn ér tuì chǐ
不敢进寸而退尺。”

I dare not advance an inch but rather retreat a foot."

shì wèi xíng wú xíng rǎng wú bì
是谓行无行，攘无臂，

This is called marching without moving, rolling up one's sleeves without arms,

rēng wú dí zhí wú bīng
扔无敌，执无兵。

facing an enemy where there is none, holding a weapon where there is none.

huò mò dà yú qīng dí qīng dí jī sàng wú bǎo
祸莫大于轻敌，轻敌几丧吾宝。

No disaster is greater than underrating the enemy; underrating the enemy nearly loses my treasures.

gù kàng bīng xiāng jiā āi zhě shèng yǐ
故抗兵相加，哀者胜矣。

So when armies meet, the side that grieves will win.

Meaning

Chapter 69 starts from a saying of strategists, spoken in the first person: "I dare not be the host but rather the guest; I dare not advance an inch but rather retreat a foot." The host (主) is the side that starts the fight; the guest (客) is the side that only responds.

Four paradoxes follow: marching without moving, rolling up one's sleeves without arms, facing an enemy where there is none, holding a weapon where there is none. One way to read them is as an army that is ready but never shows itself as the aggressor. The greatest disaster, the chapter says, is to underrate the enemy, which nearly loses "my treasures", the three treasures of chapter 67: compassion, frugality and not daring to be first.

The last line says that when armies meet, the side that grieves will win. 哀 is grief or sorrow, not fury, and it fits chapter 31, where "a victory in war is treated as a funeral". Chapters 30 and 68 belong with this one.

第七十章 Chapter 70

Easy to understand

wú yán shèn yì zhī shèn yì xíng
吾言甚易知，甚易行。

My words are very easy to understand and very easy to practice.

tiān xià mò néng zhī mò néng xíng
天下莫能知，莫能行。

Yet no one in the world can understand them, no one can practice them.

yán yǒu zōng shì yǒu jūn
言有宗，事有君。

Words have an ancestor; deeds have a master.

fú wéi wú zhī shì yǐ bù wǒ zhī
夫唯无知，是以不我知。

It is because people do not understand this that they do not understand me.

zhī wǒ zhě xī zé wǒ zhě guì
知我者希，则我者贵。

Those who understand me are few; those who follow me are rare and precious.

shì yǐ shèng rén pī hè huái yù
是以圣人被褐怀玉。

So the sage wears coarse cloth but carries jade inside.

Meaning

Chapter 70 is a complaint in the first person: the speaker is not understood. His words are very easy to understand and very easy to practice, yet no one in the world can understand them, no one can practice them. Words have an ancestor

and deeds a master (言有宗，事有君): they come from something, and it is because people do not understand this that they do not understand him.

Line 5 is read in two ways. 则 can be the verb "to take as a model", and the house translation reads it so: those who understand me are few; those who follow me are rare and precious. It can also be the word "then", giving "those who understand me are few, and so I am the more valued", which is closer to Wang Bi's comment and is how Legge translated it.

The chapter ends with one of the book's lasting images: the sage wears coarse cloth but carries jade inside (被褐怀玉). The worth is hidden under a plain surface. Chapter 78 makes the same complaint about the soft overcoming the hard, which everyone knows and no one can practice, and in chapter 41 the lesser scholar laughs out loud when he hears of the Way.

第七十一章 Chapter 71

Knowing that you do not know

zhī bù zhī shàng
知不知上，

To know that you do not know is best;

bù zhī zhī bìng
不知知病。

not to know, yet think you know, is a sickness.

fú wéi bìng bìng　　shì yǐ bù bìng
夫唯病病，是以不病。

Only by recognizing the sickness as sickness are you free of it.

shèng rén bù bìng　　yǐ qí bìng bìng，
圣人不病，以其病病，

The sage is not sick, because he recognizes the sickness as sickness;

shì yǐ bù bìng
是以不病。

that is why he is not sick.

Meaning

Chapter 71 is about knowing the limits of one's knowledge. It opens with four characters, 知不知上: to know that you do not know is best. Not to know, yet to think you know, is a sickness (病).

The rest of the chapter plays on that one word. Only by recognizing the sickness as sickness (病病) is one free of it; the sage is not sick because he recognizes it as such. The repetition makes the point by its form: the cure is simply to see the fault for what it is.

The opening line can also be read as "to know, yet to hold oneself as not knowing, is best"; the house translation takes the plainer reading. The thought is

close to chapter 33, where knowing oneself is clarity, and to chapter 56, where those who know do not speak. Readers of the Analects will recall a saying of Confucius in a similar spirit: to take what you know as known and what you do not know as unknown is knowledge.

第七十二章 Chapter 72

When the people no longer fear

mín bù wèi wēi zé dà wēi zhì
民不畏威，则大威至。

When the people no longer fear authority, a greater terror comes.

wú xiá qí suǒ jū wú yā qí suǒ shēng
无狎其所居，无厌其所生。

Do not cramp their homes; do not press down on their livelihood.

fú wéi bù yā shì yǐ bù yàn
夫唯不厌，是以不厌。

Only if you do not press down on them will they not tire of you.

shì yǐ shèng rén zì zhī bù zì xiàn
是以圣人自知不自见，

So the sage knows himself but does not show himself,

zì ài bù zì guì
自爱不自贵；

loves himself but does not exalt himself.

gù qù bǐ qǔ cǐ
故去彼取此。

Thus he lets go of that, and takes up this.

Meaning

Chapter 72 is about the limits of rule by fear. When the people no longer fear authority, a greater terror comes, whether that is revolt or disaster. So do not cramp their homes, and do not press down on their livelihood.

Lines 2 and 3 are among the hard ones. 狎 is read as 狭, "to cramp", and 厌 is read in two ways: in its first two uses as yā, "to press down", and in its last as yàn,

"to tire of". The house translation follows this: only if you do not press down on them will they not tire of you, and the chapter's pinyin marks the two readings. Wang Bi reads the lines otherwise: 居 and 生 are the ruler's own stillness and humility (清净无为谓之居，谦后不盈谓之生), and the first 不厌 is the ruler not being sated with himself. The site keeps the reading of the people's homes and livelihood.

The sage, by contrast, knows himself but does not show himself, loves himself but does not exalt himself. Chapter 22 says of the sage that he "does not show himself, and therefore is apparent", and chapter 24 says the reverse of those who "show themselves, but are invisible". The closing line, "he lets go of that, and takes up this", is a formula that also ends chapters 12 and 38.

第七十三章 Chapter 73

Heaven's net

yǒng yú gǎn zé shā
勇于敢则杀，

Bravery in daring leads to death;

yǒng yú bù gǎn zé huó
勇于不敢则活。

bravery in not daring leads to life.

cǐ liǎng zhě, huò lì huò hài
此两者，或利或害。

Of these two, one benefits and the other harms.

tiān zhī suǒ wù, shú zhī qí gù?
天之所恶，孰知其故？

What heaven loathes, who knows why?

shì yǐ shèng rén yóu nán zhī
是以圣人犹难之。

So even the sage finds it difficult.

tiān zhī dào, bù zhēng ér shàn shèng,
天之道，不争而善胜，

The Way of heaven does not contend, yet is good at winning;

bù yán ér shàn yìng, bù zhào ér zì lái,
不言而善应，不召而自来，

does not speak, yet is good at answering; is not summoned, yet comes of itself;

chǎn rán ér shàn móu
繟然而善谋。

is unhurried, yet is good at planning.

tiān wǎng huī huī shū ér bù shī
天网恢恢，疏而不失。

Heaven's net is vast; its mesh is wide, yet nothing slips through.

Meaning

Chapter 73 sets two kinds of courage side by side. Bravery in daring leads to death; bravery in not daring leads to life. One benefits and the other harms, yet when heaven loathes something, no one can say why.

Line 5, "so even the sage finds it difficult", has the same characters as a line of chapter 63 and is missing here in some early manuscripts; the site keeps it, as Wang Bi's text does. Then lines 6 to 8 portray 天之道 (the Way of heaven) in four parallel phrases: it does not contend yet is good at winning, does not speak yet is good at answering, is not summoned yet comes of itself, is unhurried yet is good at planning.

The chapter ends with a famous image: heaven's net is vast, its mesh is wide, yet nothing slips through (天网恢恢，疏而不失). Today it is often quoted to say that wrongdoers cannot escape; in the chapter it describes how heaven works without strain. Chapter 74, on who may take a life, follows directly, and chapter 76 returns to the hard and the soft.

第七十四章 Chapter 74

The master carpenter

mín bù wèi sǐ
民不畏死，

If the people do not fear death,

nài hé yǐ sǐ jù zhī
奈何以死惧之？

why threaten them with death?

ruò shǐ mín cháng wèi sǐ
若使民常畏死，

If the people always feared death,

ér wéi qí zhě
而为奇者，

and those who did wrong

wú dé zhí ér shā zhī
吾得执而杀之，

could be seized and killed by me,

shú gǎn
孰敢？

who would dare?

cháng yǒu sī shā zhě shā
常有司杀者杀，

There is always an executioner who kills.

fú dài sī shā zhě shā
夫代司杀者杀，

To kill in the executioner's place

shì wèi dài dà jiàng zhuó
是谓代大匠斫。

is like cutting wood in the master carpenter's place.

fú dài dà jiàng zhuó zhě,
夫代大匠斫者，

Those who cut in the master carpenter's place

xī yǒu bù shāng qí shǒu yǐ。
希有不伤其手矣。

rarely escape cutting their own hands.

Meaning

Chapter 74 asks what the threat of death can achieve, and who has the right to kill. If the people do not fear death, threatening them with it is useless; and even if they did fear it, and wrongdoers could be seized and killed, who would dare? The question is left open.

The second half names the deeper problem. There is always an executioner who kills, 司杀者, "the one in charge of killing". Commentators read this as heaven, or the natural order, which brings death in its own time. A ruler who kills in its place is like someone cutting wood in the master carpenter's place, and such people rarely escape cutting their own hands. The house translation keeps the plain image and leaves the reading to the reader.

为奇者 in line 4, literally "those who do strange things", means those who break the norms, translated "those who did wrong". The chapter belongs with chapter 72, on oppression, chapter 73, on daring, and chapter 75, on why the people make light of death: together they form a group on punishment and the limits of power.

第七十五章 Chapter 75

Taxes and hunger

mín zhī jī yǐ qí shàng shí shuì zhī duō
民之饥，以其上食税之多，

The people go hungry because those above eat up too much in taxes;

shì yǐ jī
是以饥。

that is why they go hungry.

mín zhī nán zhì yǐ qí shàng zhī yǒu wéi
民之难治，以其上之有为，

The people are hard to govern because those above meddle;

shì yǐ nán zhì
是以难治。

that is why they are hard to govern.

mín zhī qīng sǐ
民之轻死，

The people make light of death

yǐ qí shàng qiú shēng zhī hòu
以其上求生之厚，

because those above seek too much from life;

shì yǐ qīng sǐ
是以轻死。

that is why they make light of death.

fú wéi wú yǐ shēng wéi zhě
夫唯无以生为者，

Only those who do not live for living

shì xián yú guì shēng
是贤于贵生。

are wiser than those who prize life.

Meaning

Chapter 75 gives three causes for the people's suffering, all in the same pattern. They go hungry because those above eat up too much in taxes; they are hard to govern because those above meddle; they make light of death because those above seek too much from life. Each time, the fault lies with the rulers, not with the people.

有为 ("acting, meddling") is the opposite of 无为 (non-action), and this chapter shows its cost plainly. The phrase 求生之厚 echoes chapter 50, where people move toward death by clinging too hard to life, and rulers who grow rich while the fields lie waste appear in chapter 53.

The last two lines are read in different ways. The house translation takes 无以生为 as "not living for living": those who do not make life itself their aim are wiser than those who prize life. In context, those who "prize life" are the rulers who seek too much from it, so the line turns the chapter's complaint into a principle. Legge read the lines in a similar way.

第七十六章 Chapter 76

The living are soft

rén zhī shēng yě róu ruò qí sǐ yě jiān qiáng
人之生也柔弱，其死也坚强。

People are soft and weak when alive, hard and stiff when dead.

wàn wù cǎo mù zhī shēng yě róu cuì
万物草木之生也柔脆，

The myriad things, grass and trees, are soft and tender when alive,

qí sǐ yě kū gǎo
其死也枯槁。

dry and withered when dead.

gù jiān qiáng zhě sǐ zhī tú
故坚强者死之徒，

So the hard and stiff are companions of death;

róu ruò zhě shēng zhī tú
柔弱者生之徒。

the soft and weak are companions of life.

shì yǐ bīng qiáng zé bù shèng
是以兵强则不胜，

So an army that is rigid will not win;

mù qiáng zé bīng
木强则兵。

a tree that is rigid will be cut down.

qiáng dà chǔ xià　　róu ruò chǔ shàng
强大处下，柔弱处上。

The rigid and great take the lower place; the soft and weak take the higher place.

Meaning

Chapter 76 draws its lesson from the difference between the living and the dead. People are soft and weak when alive, hard and stiff when dead; the myriad things, grass and trees, are soft and tender when alive, dry and withered when dead. So the hard and stiff are companions of death, and the soft and weak (柔弱) are companions of life.

The lesson is then applied to armies and trees: an army that is rigid will not win, and a tree that is rigid will be cut down. The chapter ends by reversing the usual order of things: the rigid and great take the lower place, the soft and weak the higher.

Line 7, 木强则兵, is a known difficulty. Wang Bi's text has 兵, "weapon", read here as the tree being cut down; other editions have 折, "to break", or 共. The 强 of this chapter is rigidity, not the strength praised elsewhere. The theme of the soft and weak runs through chapters 36, 43, 55 and 78.

第七十七章 Chapter 77

Drawing a bow

tiān zhī dào qí yóu zhānggōng yú
天之道，其犹张弓与？

Is the Way of heaven not like drawing a bow?

gāo zhě yì zhī xià zhě jǔ zhī
高者抑之，下者举之；

What is high is pressed down, what is low is raised up;

yǒu yú zhě sǔn zhī，
有余者损之，

what has too much is reduced,

bù zú zhě bǔ zhī。
不足者补之。

what has too little is added to.

tiān zhī dào sǔn yǒu yú ér bǔ bù zú。
天之道，损有余而补不足。

The Way of heaven reduces what has too much and adds to what has too little.

rén zhī dào zé bù rán，
人之道则不然，

The way of people is not so:

sǔn bù zú yǐ fèng yǒu yú。
损不足以奉有余。

it takes from those who have too little to give to those who have too much.

shú néng yǒu yú yǐ fèng tiān xià
孰能有余以奉天下？

Who can take what he has in excess and give it to the world?

wéi yǒu dào zhě
唯有道者。

Only one who has the Way.

shì yǐ shèng rén wéi ér bù shì
是以圣人为而不恃，

So the sage acts without expecting,

gōng chéng ér bù chǔ qí bù yù xiàn xián
功成而不处，其不欲见贤。

achieves but does not dwell on it, and has no wish to show his worth.

Meaning

Chapter 77 sets the balance of heaven against the habits of people. Is the Way of heaven not like drawing a bow? When a bow is strung and drawn, what is high is pressed down and what is low is raised up; in the same way, the Way of heaven reduces what has too much and adds to what has too little.

The way of people, lowercase in the translation because it is not the Way, does the opposite: it takes from those who have too little to give to those who have too much. Only one who has the Way can take what he has in excess and give it to the world. The chapter is among the book's plainest statements about fairness.

The sage acts without expecting, achieves but does not dwell on it, and has no wish to show his worth, lines that echo chapters 2 and 51. 天之道 (the Way of heaven) returns in chapters 9, 73, 79 and 81; chapter 79 adds that it has no favorites.

第七十八章 Chapter 78

Nothing softer than water

tiān xià mò róu ruò yú shuǐ
天下莫柔弱于水，

Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water,

ér gōng jiān qiáng zhě mò zhī néngshèng
而攻坚强者，莫之能胜，

yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing surpasses it,

qí wú yǐ yì zhī
其无以易之。

for nothing can take its place.

ruò zhī shèngqiáng
弱之胜强，

The weak overcomes the strong,

róu zhī shènggāng
柔之胜刚，

the soft overcomes the hard:

tiān xià mò bù zhī mò néng xíng
天下莫不知莫能行。

everyone in the world knows it, yet no one can practice it.

shì yǐ shèng rén yún
是以圣人云：

So the sage says:

shòu guó zhī gòu shì wèi shè jì zhǔ
“受国之垢，是谓社稷主；

"One who takes on the filth of the state is called lord of the altars of earth and grain;

shòu guó bù xiáng shì wéi tiān xià wáng
受国不祥，是为天下王。”

one who takes on the misfortunes of the state is king of the world."

zhèng yán ruò fǎn
正言若反。

True words seem contrary.

Meaning

Chapter 78 returns to the image of water. Nothing in the world is softer or weaker, yet nothing surpasses it for attacking the hard and strong, for nothing can take its place. The weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard: everyone knows this, yet no one can practice it.

A saying of the sage then applies the lesson to rule. One who takes on the filth of the state is lord of the altars of earth and grain (社稷), that is, of the state itself; one who takes on its misfortunes is king of the world. To lead is to accept what is low and unwanted, as water in chapter 8 goes to places that everyone abhors.

The chapter ends with four characters that could stand for the whole book: 正言若反, true words seem contrary. Many of its sayings take this form, from the soft overcoming the hard to the sage who puts himself last, and thus is first. Water and softness also appear in chapters 8, 43 and 76, and chapter 70 voices the same frustration that easy words go unpracticed.

第七十九章 Chapter 79

The tally

hé dà yuàn bì yǒu yú yuàn
和大怨，必有余怨，

When a great grievance is settled, some grievance always remains;

ān kě yǐ wéi shàn
安可以为善？

how can this be called good?

shì yǐ shèng rén zhí zuǒ qì
是以圣人执左契，

So the sage holds the left half of the tally

ér bù zé yú rén
而不责于人。

but makes no demands on others.

yǒu dé sī qì wú dé sī chè
有德司契，无德司彻。

One with virtue keeps the tally; one without virtue collects the dues.

tiān dào wú qīn cháng yǔ shàn rén
天道无亲，常与善人。

The Way of heaven has no favorites; it is always with the good.

Meaning

Chapter 79 is about grievances and how to avoid them. When a great grievance is settled, some grievance always remains, so settling it cannot be called truly good. Better not to create the grievance at all.

The image comes from contracts. A tally (契) was split in two, and the creditor held the left half. The sage holds the left half but makes no demands on others:

he has the claim and does not press it. One with virtue keeps the tally; one without virtue collects the dues (彻, a tax or levy). The difference is between holding a right and enforcing it.

The last line, "the Way of heaven has no favorites; it is always with the good", can be set beside chapter 5, where heaven and earth are inhumane. Heaven takes no sides, yet the good find it with them. Some modern editors move "repay resentment with virtue" from chapter 63 into this chapter, after the first line; the site keeps the received order.

第八十章 Chapter 80

A small state

xiǎo guó guǎ mín　　shǐ yǒu shí bǎi zhī qì ér bù yòng
小国寡民，使有什伯之器而不用，

A small state with few people: let them have tools for ten or a hundred, and not use them;

shǐ mín zhòng sǐ ér bù yuǎn xǐ
使民重死而不远徙。

let the people take death seriously and not travel far.

suī yǒu zhōu yú　　wú suǒ chéng zhī
虽有舟舆，无所乘之；

Though they have boats and carts, they have no need to ride them;

suī yǒu jiǎ bīng　　wú suǒ chén zhī
虽有甲兵，无所陈之。

though they have armor and weapons, they have no need to display them.

shǐ rén fù jié shéng ér yòng zhī
使人复结绳而用之，

Let people go back to knotting cords to keep records,

gān qí shí　　měi qí fú
甘其食，美其服，

find their food sweet, their clothes beautiful,

ān qí jū
安其居，

their homes peaceful,

lè qí sú
乐其俗。

and delight in their customs.

lín guó xiāngwàng jī quǎn zhī shēngxiāng wén
邻国相望，鸡犬之声相闻，

Neighboring states can see each other, and hear each other's cocks and dogs,

mín zhì lǎo sǐ bù xiāngwǎng lái
民至老死，不相往来。

yet the people grow old and die without ever visiting each other.

Meaning

Chapter 80 imagines a whole society at its simplest: a small state with few people (小国寡民). They have tools for ten or a hundred, but do not use them; they take death seriously and do not travel far. Boats and carts, armor and weapons exist, but nothing calls for them.

The people go back to knotting cords to keep records, a practice that tradition places before writing. They find their food sweet and their clothes beautiful, are at peace in their homes and delight in their customs. The neighboring state is so close that its cocks and dogs can be heard, yet the people grow old and die without ever visiting it.

Readers have long disagreed about how literally to take the chapter, as a plan of government or as a picture of contentment. 什伯之器 in line 1 is read here as tools for ten or a hundred people; others take 什伯 as squads of soldiers. Chapters 3, 19 and 57 make the case for simplicity in other words, and chapter 46 says that no disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough.

第八十一章 Chapter 81

True words are not beautiful

xìn yán bù měi　　měi yán bù xìn
信言不美，美言不信。

True words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not true.

shàn zhě bù biàn
善者不辩，

The good do not argue;

biàn zhě bù shàn
辩者不善。

those who argue are not good.

zhī zhě bù bó
知者不博，

Those who know are not learned in everything;

bó zhě bù zhī
博者不知。

those learned in everything do not know.

shèng rén bù jī
圣人不积，

The sage does not hoard.

jì yǐ wèi rén jǐ yù yǒu
既以为人己愈有，

The more he does for others, the more he has;

jì yǐ yǔ rén jǐ yù duō
既以与人己愈多。

the more he gives to others, the more he gains.

tiān zhī dào lì ér bù hài
天之道，利而不害；

The Way of heaven benefits and does not harm;

shèng rén zhī dào wéi ér bù zhēng
圣人之道，为而不争。

the Way of the sage acts and does not contend.

Meaning

Chapter 81, the last of the book, gathers its themes into short paired sayings. True words are not beautiful and beautiful words are not true; the good do not argue and those who argue are not good; those who know are not learned in everything, and those learned in everything do not know.

Then comes the sage. He does not hoard, and the more he does for others and gives to others, the more he has: giving does not empty him. The thought recalls chapter 7, where the sage "puts himself last, and thus is first", and chapter 77: "Who can take what he has in excess and give it to the world? Only one who has the Way."

The book ends on two parallel lines. The Way of heaven benefits and does not harm; the Way of the sage acts and does not contend (为而不争). Its last word, 争, returns to a theme of chapter 8, where water "benefits all things without struggle". The opening pair can be read beside chapter 56: those who know do not speak.