道德经

Dao De Jing

Attributed to Laozi

The Chinese text, 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

道可道非常道，

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

名可名非常名。

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

无名天地之始，

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

有名万物之母。

The named is the mother of the myriad things.

故常无欲，以观其妙，

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

常有欲，以观其徼。

ever desiring, one merely sees its manifestations.

此两者同出而异名，

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

同谓之玄，玄之又玄，

both are considered mysteries, mysteries within mysteries,

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

天下皆知美之为美，斯恶已，

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

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.

故有无相生，难易相成，

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

长短相较，高下相倾，

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

音声相和，前后相随。

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

是以圣人处无为之事，

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

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.

生而不有，为而不恃，

Living without possessing, acting without expectations,

功成而弗居。夫唯弗居，

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

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

不尚贤，使民不争，

Not adulating the worthy makes people non-contentious.

不贵难得之货，使民不为盗。

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

不见可欲，使民心不乱。

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

是以圣人之治，

Thus the sage governs:

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.

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.

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

道冲而用之或不盈，
The Way is empty, yet used, it never fills up.

渊兮似万物之宗。
So deep as to be the ancestor of the myriad things.

挫其锐，解其纷，
It blunts sharpness, untangles knots,

和其光，同其尘。
softens the glare, combines the elements.

湛兮似或存，
So profound as to possibly have a remainder.

吾不知谁之子，
I do not know what it is,

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

天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；

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

圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。

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

天地之间，其犹橐籥乎？

Space in the cosmos, is it just like bellows?

虚而不屈，动而愈出。

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

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

谷神不死，
The spirit of abundance never dies,

是谓玄牝，
it is called the mystic female,

玄牝之门，
the opening of the mystic female,

是谓天地根。
is called the root of heaven and earth.

绵绵若存，
It infinitely seems to exist,

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

天长地久。

The cosmos is infinite and timeless.

天地所以能长且久者，

The reason heaven and earth can last so long

以其不自生，

Is that they do not foster themselves.

故能长生。

Thus they can live long.

是以圣人后其身而身先，

The sage puts himself last, and thus is first,

外其身而身存。

he detaches himself, and thus endures.

非以其无私邪？

Is he not selfless?

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

上善若水。
The highest good is like water.

水善利万物而不争，
Water benefits all things without struggle,

处众人之所恶，
it goes to places that everyone abhors,

故几于道。
thus is almost like the Way.

居善地，心善渊，
In dwelling, good at choosing the ground; in the mind, good at depth;

与善仁，言善信，
in giving, good at humaneness; in speech, good at trust;

正善治，事善能，
in governing, good at order; in work, good at ability;

动善时。夫唯不争，
in movement, good at timing. Precisely because it does not contend,

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

持而盈之，
Persisting in fulfilling it,

不如其已。
is inferior to stopping in time.

揣而锐之，
Protecting and sharpening it,

不可长保。
cannot be preserved forever.

金玉满堂，
Treasure-filled halls,

莫之能守。
cannot be defended.

富贵而骄，
Wealth and pride,

自遗其咎。
lead to self-loss and bad fortune.

功遂身退，
Accomplish and retire,

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

载营魄抱一，
Manage to unite your soul and body,

能无离乎？
can they avoid separation?

专气致柔，
Make your breathing soft,

能婴儿乎？
can that make you a newborn child?

涤除玄览，
Cleanse your dark thoughts,

能无疵乎？
can it make you flawless?

爱民治国，
Love people and govern your country,

能无知乎？
can you avoid over-manipulation?

天门开阖，
As the mysterious gate opens and closes,

能无雌乎？
can you be impassive?

明白四达，
As your understanding reaches everywhere,

能无为乎？
can you refrain from striving?

生之，畜之，
Create it, foster it,

生而不有，
live without possessing,

为而不恃，
act without expecting,

长而不宰，
lead without domineering,

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

三十辐共一毂，
Thirty spokes join at the axis,

当其无，
the empty space in between them,

有车之用。
makes the cart practical.

埏埴以为器，
Mold some clay to make a pot,

当其无，
its emptiness within,

有器之用。
makes the pot usable.

凿户牖以为室，
Cut a door and windows to create a room,

当其无，有室之用。
its emptiness within, makes the room useful.

故有之以为利，
Therefore, presence brings benefits,

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

五色令人目盲，
Too many colors render people blind,

五音令人耳聋，
too many sounds render people deaf,

五味令人口爽，
too many flavors dull the palate,

驰骋畋猎令人心发狂，
racing and hunting madden the mind,

难得之货令人行妨。
hard-to-get goods make people misbehave.

是以圣人为腹不为目，
Therefore the sage provides for the soul, not for the senses.

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

宠辱若惊，
Favor and disgrace are alike alarming,

贵大患若身。
value great trouble as your own self.

何谓宠辱若惊？
What do I mean by "Favor and disgrace are alike alarming"?

宠为下，得之若惊，
Favor is lowly: gaining it is alarming,

失之若惊，
and so is losing it,

是谓宠辱若惊。
thus, I say "Favor and disgrace are alike alarming".

何谓贵大患若身？
What do I mean by "Value great trouble as your own self"?

吾所以有大患者，
The reason I have great trouble

为吾有身，及吾无身，
Is that I have a body; if I had no body,

吾有何患！

what trouble could I have!

故贵以身为天下，

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

若可寄天下；

Can be trusted with the world;

爱以身为天下，

one who loves his body as he loves the world

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

视之不见，名曰夷，

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

听之不闻，名曰希，

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

搏之不得，名曰微。

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

此三者不可致诘，故混而为一。

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

其上不皦，其下不昧。

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

绳绳不可名，复归于无物，

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

是谓无状之状，无物之象。

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

是谓惚恍。

This is called the indistinct.

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.

执古之道，以御今之有，

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

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

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.

夫唯不可识，故强为之容。

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

豫兮若冬涉川，

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

犹兮若畏四邻，

Just like one afraid of his neighbors on all sides.

俨兮其若容，

Respectful, toward its outer appearance.

涣兮若冰之将释，

Like ice, ever melting away before revealing itself.

敦兮其若朴，

Considerate toward its simplicity.

旷兮其若谷，混兮其若浊。

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

孰能浊以静之徐清？

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

孰能安以久动之徐生？

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

保此道者不欲盈，

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

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

致虚极，守静笃，

To reach extreme vacuity, preserve stillness earnestly.

万物并作，吾以观复。

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

夫物芸芸，各复归其根。

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

归根曰静，是谓复命。

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

复命曰常，知常曰明，

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

不知常，妄作，凶。

Not knowing the constant, acting arbitrarily, is harmful.

知常容，容乃公，

Knowing the constant is receptivity, which is impartial.

公乃王，王乃天，

Impartiality is kingship. Kingship is the universe.

天乃道，道乃久，

The universe is the Way, the Way is eternal.

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

太上，下知有之。

The great masters: those below only know they exist.

其次，亲而誉之。

The next are loved and praised.

其次，畏之。

The next are feared.

其次，侮之。

The next are despised.

信不足焉，有不信焉。

Where trust is insufficient, there is distrust.

悠兮其贵言。

Unhurried, he is sparing with his words.

功成事遂，

Deed accomplished and task successful,

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

大道废，有仁义；

When the great Way perishes, appear humaneness and justice.

智慧出，有大伪；

When intelligence is manifest, arises great deception.

六亲不和，有孝慈；

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

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

绝圣弃智，民利百倍；

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

绝仁弃义，民复孝慈；

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

绝巧弃利，盗贼无有。

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

此三者，以为文不足，

These above three, are insufficiently described by mere words,

故令有所属，

therefore let people have something to hold on to:

见素抱朴，

look at the essence and embrace simplicity.

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

绝学无忧。

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

唯之与阿，相去几何？

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

善之与恶，相去若何？

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

人之所畏，不可不畏。

What the people fear, one cannot but fear.

荒兮其未央哉！

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

众人熙熙，如享太牢，

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

如春登台。

enjoy climbing the Spring Altar.

我独泊兮其未兆，

I remain alone, not yet having revealed myself.

如婴儿之未孩。

Like an infant who has not yet laughed.

儽儽兮若无所归。

Weary, like one despairing of nowhere to return to.

众人皆有余，

All the people possess surplus,

而我独若遗。

while I alone seem left behind.

我愚人之心也哉！

Mine is the mind of a fool!

沌沌兮！

So confused!

俗人昭昭，我独昏昏；

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

俗人察察，我独闷闷。

Average people know everything. I am alone and depressed.

澹兮其若海，

Tranquil like the ocean,

飂兮若无止。

high winds that never stop.

众人皆有以，而我独顽似鄙。

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

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

孔德之容，惟道是从。

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

道之为物，惟恍惟惚。

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

惚兮恍兮，其中有象；

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

恍兮惚兮，其中有物。

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

窈兮冥兮，其中有精；

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

其精甚真，其中有信。

Its essence is very real: within lies truth.

自古及今，其名不去，

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

以阅众甫。

and the study of all its origins.

吾何以知众甫之状哉？

How do I know the form of all its origins?

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

曲则全，枉则直，

The bent is made whole, the crooked is straightened,

洼则盈，敝则新，

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

少则得，多则惑。

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

是以圣人抱一，为天下式。

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

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.

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.

夫唯不争，故天下莫能与之争。

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

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?

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

希言自然。

To speak little is natural.

故飘风不终朝，

Similarly the wind does not blow the whole morning,

骤雨不终日。

nor does a downpour last the whole day.

孰为此者？天地。

What causes these? Heaven and earth.

天地尚不能久，

Even heaven and earth cannot make these last,

而况于人乎？

how much less can people?

故从事于道者，

Thus, by engaging with the Way,

同于道，

the daoist bonds with the Way,

德者同于德，

the virtuous bonds with virtue,

失者同于失。

the vanquished bonds with defeat.

同于道者，道亦乐得之；

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

同于德者，德亦乐得之；

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

同于失者，失亦乐得之。

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

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

企者不立，跨者不行，

Standers do not remain upright, striders do not advance.

自见者不明，自是者不彰，

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

自伐者无功，自矜者不长。

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

其在道也，曰余食赘行。

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

物或恶之，

all things may loathe them.

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.

余食赘行 is a hard phrase. 赘 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

有物混成，先天地生。
Something formed out of chaos, born before heaven and earth.

寂兮寥兮，独立不改。
So silent and desolate! Self-standing and invariable.

周行而不殆，可以为天下母。
It revolves without tiring, and could be the mother of the world.

吾不知其名，字之曰道，
I don't know its name. As a word, I label it the "Way".

强为之名曰大。
Imposing on it a name, I call it "great."

大曰逝，逝曰远，
Greatness encompasses the passing of time, the passing of time encompasses the distant,

远曰反。
the distant entails return.

故道大，天大，
Hence, the Way is great, the universe is great,

地大，王亦大。
the earth is great, and the king is also great.

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.

人法地，地法天，

Human beings follow the earth, earth follows the cosmos.

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

重为轻根，静为躁君。

Heaviness is the root of lightness, composure rules impetuousness.

是以圣人终日行不离辎重。

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

唯有荣观，燕处超然，

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

奈何万乘之主，

What's to be done with the innumerable leaders,

而以身轻天下？

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

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

善行无辙迹，
A good traveler leaves no tracks,

善言无瑕谪，
a good speaker lacks flaws and rebuke,

善数不用筹策，
a good counter needs no calculator.

善闭无关楗而不可开，
What is properly closed requires no lock, and yet cannot be opened,

善结无绳约而不可解。
what is well bound requires no knot, and yet cannot be untied.

是以圣人常善救人，
This is how the sage always elevates people,

故无弃人；
and doesn't ostracize others.

常善救物，故无弃物，
He always takes care of things, and doesn't cast away anything.

是谓袭明。
This is called following the light.

故善人者，不善人之师；

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

不善人者，善人之资。

the lesser person is the endowment of the benefactor.

不贵其师，不爱其资，

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

虽智大迷，

though you may be intelligent, you are greatly confused,

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

知其雄，守其雌，为天下溪。

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

为天下溪，常德不离，

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

复归于婴儿。

ever returning to the newborn.

知其白，守其黑，为天下式。

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

为天下式，常德不忒，

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

复归于无极。

ever reverting to infinity.

知其荣，守其辱，为天下谷。

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

为天下谷，常德乃足，

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

复归于朴。

ever returning to the uncarved block.

朴散则为器，

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

圣人用之则为官长。

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

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

将欲取天下而为之，
If you wish to take the world and run it,

吾见其不得已。
I can see that you will not succeed.

天下神器，不可为也。
The world is a sacred vessel that cannot be acted upon.

为者败之，执者失之。
Manipulators spoil it, commanders lose it.

故物或行或随，
Thus, some things move, while some follow.

或歔或吹，
Some sigh, while some blow.

或强或羸，
Some are strong, while some are weak.

或挫或隳。
Some destroy, while some are destroyed.

是以圣人去甚，
Hence, the sage shuns extremes,

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

以道佐人主者，
Using the Way to assist the ruler,

不以兵强天下，
is not a means to dominate people by military force.

其事好还。
This undertaking backfires.

师之所处，荆棘生焉。
Where troops have camped, thorns and brambles grow.

大军之后，必有凶年。
A great war's aftermath, necessarily involves famine.

善者果而已，不敢以取强。
Great virtue brings results, nothing else. Do not dare to use violence.

果而勿矜，果而勿伐，
Accomplish but don't boast, accomplish but don't vaunt,

果而勿骄，果而不得已，
accomplish but don't be proud, accomplish and that is all,

果而勿强。
accomplish but don't use violence.

物壮则老，

Things with strength ultimately wither,

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

夫佳兵者，不祥之器。

Fine weapons are instruments of ill omen.

物或恶之，故有道者不处。

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

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.

兵者，不祥之器，

Weapons are instruments of ill omen,

非君子之器。

not the instruments of the noble one.

不得已而用之，

When he has no choice but to use them,

恬淡为上，胜而不美。

calm restraint is best. Victory is not beautiful.

而美之者，是乐杀人。

To find it beautiful is to delight in killing people.

夫乐杀人者，

One who delights in killing people

则不可得志于天下矣。

cannot achieve his aims in the world.

吉事尚左，凶事尚右。

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

偏将军居左，上将军居右，

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

言以丧礼处之。

which means war is treated as a funeral.

杀人之众，以哀悲泣之，

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

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

道常无名，朴虽小，

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

天下莫能臣也。

no one in the world can make it a subject.

侯王若能守之，

If lords and kings could hold to it,

万物将自宾。

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

天地相合以降甘露，

Heaven and earth would join and let sweet dew fall,

民莫之令而自均。

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

始制有名，名亦既有，

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

夫亦将知止。

one should also know when to stop.

知止可以不殆。

Knowing when to stop, one can avoid danger.

譬道之在天下，

The Way in the world

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

知人者智，自知者明。

Knowing others is wisdom; knowing yourself is clarity.

胜人者有力，自胜者强。

Overcoming others takes force; overcoming yourself is strength.

知足者富，强行者有志，

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

不失其所者久，

Not losing your place is to last.

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

大道泛兮，其可左右。

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

万物恃之而生而不辞，

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

功成不名有，

It completes its work but does not claim it.

衣养万物而不为主，

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

常无欲，可名于小；

Ever without desire, it can be called small;

万物归焉而不为主，

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

可名为大。

it can be called great.

以其终不自为大，

Because it never makes itself great,

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

执大象，天下往；
Hold to the great image, and the world will come;

往而不害，安平太。
it comes and is not harmed: peace, calm and ease.

乐与饵，过客止。
Music and fine food make the passer-by stop.

道之出口，
But when the Way is spoken,

淡乎其无味。
it is bland and has no flavor.

视之不足见，
Looked at, it cannot be seen;

听之不足闻，
listened to, it cannot be heard;

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

将欲歙之，必固张之；
What is to be shrunk must first be stretched;

将欲弱之，必固强之；
what is to be weakened must first be strengthened;

将欲废之，必固兴之；
what is to be cast down must first be raised up;

将欲夺之，必固与之，
what is to be taken must first be given.

是谓微明。
This is called subtle insight.

柔弱胜刚强。
The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.

鱼不可脱于渊，
Fish must not leave the deep water;

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

道常无为而无不为，
The Way never acts, yet nothing is left undone.

侯王若能守之，
If lords and kings could hold to it,

万物将自化。
the myriad things would transform of themselves.

化而欲作，
If, while they transform, desires arise,

吾将镇之以无名之朴。
I would calm them with the nameless uncarved block.

无名之朴，
The nameless uncarved block

夫亦将无欲。
brings an end to desire.

不欲以静，
Without desire there is stillness,

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

上德不德，是以有德；
Superior virtue is not "virtuous"; that is why it has virtue.

下德不失德，是以无德。
Inferior virtue never lets go of virtue; that is why it has no virtue.

上德无为而无以为，
Superior virtue does not act, and has no motive for acting.

下德为之而有以为。
Inferior virtue acts, and has a motive for acting.

上仁为之而无以为，
Superior humaneness acts, but has no motive for acting.

上义为之而有以为，
Superior justice acts, and has a motive for acting.

上礼为之而莫之应，
Superior ritual acts, and when no one responds,

则攘臂而扔之。
it rolls up its sleeves and forces people.

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;

失仁而后义，失义而后礼。

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

夫礼者，忠信之薄而乱之首。

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

前识者，道之华而愚之始。

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

是以大丈夫处其厚，

So the great man dwells in what is thick,

不居其薄；

not in what is thin;

处其实，不居其华。

in the fruit, not in the flower.

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

昔之得一者，天得一以清，

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

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,

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,

侯王得一以为天下贞。

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

其致之。

It is the One that brought this about.

天无以清将恐裂，

If heaven were not clear, it might split;

地无以宁将恐废，

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

神无以灵将恐歇，

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

谷无以盈将恐竭，

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

万物无以生将恐灭，

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

侯王无以贵高将恐蹶。

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

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.

是以侯王自谓孤、寡、不谷。

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

此非以贱为本邪？非乎？

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

故致数舆无舆。

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

不欲琭琭如玉，

Do not wish to glitter like jade,

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 致数舆无舆 is hard. Wang Bi's text has 舆, 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

反者，道之动；
Returning is the movement of the Way;

弱者，道之用。
weakness is the use of the Way.

天下万物生于有，
The myriad things of the world are born from presence,

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

上士闻道，
When the superior scholar hears of the Way,

勤而行之；
he practices it diligently;

中士闻道，
when the average scholar hears of the Way,

若存若亡；
he half keeps it, half loses it;

下士闻道，大笑之。
when the lesser scholar hears of the Way, he laughs out loud at it.

不笑不足以为道。
If he did not laugh, it would not be the Way.

故建言有之：
So the established sayings have it:

明道若昧，进道若退，
The bright Way seems dark, the Way forward seems to go back,

夷道若颣，上德若谷，
the smooth Way seems rough, the highest virtue seems like a valley,

大白若辱，广德若不足，

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

建德若偷，

firm virtue seems idle,

质真若渝，

true substance seems to change,

大方无隅，大器晚成，

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

大音希声，大象无形，

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

道隐无名。

the Way is hidden and nameless.

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

道生一，
The Way gives birth to one,

一生二，二生三，
one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three,

三生万物。
three gives birth to the myriad things.

万物负阴而抱阳，
The myriad things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang,

冲气以为和。
and the blending breath brings them into harmony.

人之所恶，唯孤、寡、不谷，
What people loathe is to be "orphaned", "widowed" and "unworthy",

而王公以为称。
yet kings and lords use these as their titles.

故物或损之而益，
So things may gain by being diminished,

或益之而损。
or lose by being increased.

人之所教，我亦教之。

What others teach, I also teach:

强梁者不得其死，

the violent do not die a natural death.

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

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.

无有入无间，

What has no substance enters where there is no gap.

吾是以知无为之有益。

From this I know the benefit of non-action.

不言之教，无为之益，

Teaching without words, the benefit of non-action:

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

名与身孰亲？
Fame or your life: which is dearer?

身与货孰多？
Your life or your goods: which is worth more?

得与亡孰病？
Gain or loss: which does more harm?

是故甚爱必大费，
So great attachment is sure to cost much,

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;

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

大成若缺，其用不弊。

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

大盈若冲，其用不穷。

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

大直若屈，

Great straightness seems bent,

大巧若拙，

great skill seems clumsy,

大辩若讷。

great eloquence seems to stammer.

躁胜寒，静胜热。

Movement overcomes cold; stillness overcomes heat.

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

天下有道，却走马以粪。

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

天下无道，戎马生于郊。

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

祸莫大于不知足；

No disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough;

咎莫大于欲得。

no fault is greater than wanting to gain.

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

不出户，知天下；
Without going out of the door, one knows the world;

不窥牖，见天道。
without looking out of the window, one sees the Way of heaven.

其出弥远，其知弥少。
The farther one goes, the less one knows.

是以圣人不行而知，
So the sage knows without going,

不见而名，
names without seeing,

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

为学日益，为道日损。

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

损之又损，以至于无为。

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

无为而无不为。

With non-action, nothing is left undone.

取天下常以无事，

One wins the world by constantly leaving it alone;

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

圣人无常心，
The sage has no fixed mind of his own;

以百姓心为心。
he makes the people's mind his mind.

善者，吾善之；
To the good, I am good;

不善者，吾亦善之，德善。
to those who are not good, I am also good, and so goodness is gained.

信者，吾信之；
The trustworthy I trust;

不信者，吾亦信之，德信。
the untrustworthy I also trust, and so trust is gained.

圣人在天下歙歙，
The sage in the world draws himself in,

为天下浑其心，
and for the world's sake keeps his mind undivided;

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

出生入死。
Coming out into life, going into death.

生之徒，十有三；
Those who follow life are three in ten;

死之徒，十有三；
those who follow death are three in ten;

人之生，
and people who live

动之死地，
but move toward the place of death

亦十有三。
are also three in ten.

夫何故？
Why is this?

以其生生之厚。
Because they cling too hard to living.

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,

入军不被甲兵；

and goes into battle without armor or weapons;

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,

兵无所容其刃。

the weapon nowhere to lodge its blade.

夫何故？

Why is this?

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

道生之，德畜之，物形之，

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

势成之。

circumstance completes them.

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.

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.

故道生之，德畜之。

So the Way gives them life and virtue nourishes them.

长之育之，亭之毒之，

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

养之覆之。

nurtures them and protects them.

生而不有，

It lives without possessing,

为而不恃，

acts without expecting,

长而不宰。

leads without domineering.

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

天下有始，以为天下母。
The world has a beginning, which is the mother of the world.

既得其母，以知其子，
Having found the mother, one knows the children;

既知其子，复守其母，
knowing the children, one holds again to the mother,

没身不殆。
and to the end of one's life there is no danger.

塞其兑，
Close the openings,

闭其门，终身不勤。
shut the doors, and all your life you will not be worn out.

开其兑，
Open the openings,

济其事，终身不救。
busy yourself with affairs, and all your life you cannot be saved.

见小曰明，守柔曰强。
Seeing the small is called clarity; keeping to the soft is called strength.

用其光，复归其明，

Use the light and return to clarity,

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

使我介然有知，行于大道，
If I had the least knowledge, walking on the great Way,

唯施是畏。
my only fear would be to stray from it.

大道甚夷，而民好径。
The great Way is very smooth, yet people love side paths.

朝甚除，
The court is spotless,

田甚芜，仓甚虚；
while the fields are full of weeds and the granaries empty;

服文彩，
they wear embroidered robes,

带利剑，厌饮食，
carry sharp swords, are sated with food and drink,

财货有余；
and have wealth to spare:

是为盗夸。
this is called the boasting of robbers.

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

善建者不拔，
What is well planted cannot be uprooted,

善抱者不脱，
what is well held cannot slip away,

子孙以祭祀不辍。
and children and grandchildren will keep up the offerings without end.

修之于身，其德乃真；
Cultivate it in yourself, and virtue will be genuine;

修之于家，其德乃余；
cultivate it in the family, and virtue will be abundant;

修之于乡，其德乃长；
cultivate it in the village, and virtue will last;

修之于国，其德乃丰；
cultivate it in the state, and virtue will flourish;

修之于天下，其德乃普。
cultivate it in the world, and virtue will be everywhere.

故以身观身，以家观家，
So observe the self through the self, the family through the family,

以乡观乡，以国观国，

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

以天下观天下。

the world through the world.

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

含德之厚，比于赤子。

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

蜂虿虺蛇不螫，猛兽不据，

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

攫鸟不搏。

birds of prey do not strike him.

骨弱筋柔而握固。

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

未知牝牡之合而朘作，

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

精之至也。

this is vital essence at its height.

终日号而不嗄，和之至也。

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

知和曰常，知常曰明。

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

益生曰祥。

Forcing life is called ill-omened.

心使气曰强。

The mind driving the breath is called forcing.

物壮则老，

Things with strength ultimately wither,

是谓不道，

this is not the Way,

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

知者不言，言者不知。

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

塞其兑，闭其门，挫其锐，

Close the openings, shut the doors, blunt sharpness,

解其分，和其光，同其尘，

untangle knots, soften the glare, combine the elements:

是谓玄同。

this is called mysterious oneness.

故不可得而亲，

So one cannot draw near to it,

不可得而疏；

nor hold it at a distance;

不可得而利，不可得而害；

one cannot benefit it, nor harm it;

不可得而贵，不可得而贱。

one cannot honor it, nor debase it.

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

以正治国，以奇用兵，
Govern the state by what is upright; wage war by surprise;

以无事取天下。
win the world by leaving it alone.

吾何以知其然哉？以此。
How do I know it is so? By this:

天下多忌讳，
the more prohibitions in the world,

而民弥贫；
the poorer the people;

民多利器，国家滋昏；
the more sharp tools the people have, the more the state falls into confusion;

人多伎巧，
the more skill and cunning people have,

奇物滋起；
the more strange things appear;

法令滋彰，盗贼多有。
the more laws and orders are displayed, the more thieves and robbers there are.

故圣人云：
So the sage says:

“我无为而民自化，
"I do not act, and the people transform of themselves;

我好静而民自正，
I love stillness, and the people become upright of themselves;

我无事而民自富，
I leave things alone, and the people grow rich of themselves;

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

其政闷闷，其民淳淳；

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

其政察察，其民缺缺。

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

祸兮福之所倚，

Misfortune is what fortune leans on;

福兮祸之所伏。

fortune is where misfortune hides.

孰知其极？其无正。

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

正复为奇，善复为妖。

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

人之迷，其日固久。

People have been lost in this for a long time.

是以圣人方而不割，

So the sage is square but does not cut,

廉而不刿，直而不肆，

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

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

治人事天，莫若啬。

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

夫唯啬，是谓早服；

Being frugal means submitting early;

早服谓之重积德；

submitting early means accumulating virtue again and again;

重积德则无不克，

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

无不克则莫知其极；

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

莫知其极，可以有国；

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

有国之母，可以长久；

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

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 嗇 (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

治大国，若烹小鲜。

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

以道莅天下，其鬼不神；

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

非其鬼不神，其神不伤人；

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

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.

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

大国者下流，
A great state is like the lower course of a river,

天下之交。
where the whole world meets.

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;

以静为下。
by stillness she takes the lower place.

故大国以下小国，
So when a great state places itself below a small state,

则取小国；
it wins the small state;

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.

故或下以取，
So one wins by lowering itself,

或下而取。

the other wins by being low.

大国不过欲兼畜人，

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

小国不过欲入事人。

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

夫两者各得其所欲，

For both to get what they want,

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

道者万物之奥。

The Way is the hidden refuge of the myriad things,

善人之宝，不善人之所保。

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

美言可以市，尊行可以加人。

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

人之不善，何弃之有？

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

故立天子，置三公，

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

虽有拱璧以先驷马，

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

不如坐进此道。

it is better to sit still and offer this Way.

古之所以贵此道者何？

Why did the ancients value this Way?

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?

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

为无为，事无事，

Act without acting, work without working,

味无味。

taste without tasting.

大小多少，报怨以德。

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

图难于其易，为大于其细；

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

天下难事必作于易，

The difficult things of the world always start out easy;

天下大事必作于细。

the great things of the world always start out small.

是以圣人终不为大，

So the sage never does anything great,

故能成其大。

and so he can achieve his greatness.

夫轻诺必寡信，

Light promises always earn little trust;

多易而必多难。

taking much as easy always brings much difficulty.

是以圣人犹难之，

So even the sage treats things as difficult,

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

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.

其脆易泮，其微易散。

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

为之于未有，

Deal with things before they exist;

治之于未乱。

put them in order before disorder comes.

合抱之木，

A tree as wide as your arms can reach

生于毫末；

grows from a tiny shoot;

九层之台，

a tower of nine stories

起于累土；

rises from a heap of earth;

千里之行，始于足下。

a journey of a thousand miles starts beneath your feet.

为者败之，执者失之。

Manipulators spoil it, commanders lose it.

是以圣人无为故无败，

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

无执故无失。

does not grasp, and so does not lose.

民之从事，常于几成而败之。

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

慎终如始，则无败事。

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

是以圣人欲不欲，

So the sage desires not to desire,

不贵难得之货；

and does not value goods that are hard to get;

学不学，复众人之所过。

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

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

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,

将以愚之。

but to keep them simple.

民之难治，以其智多。

People are hard to govern because they are too clever.

故以智治国，国之贼，

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

不以智治国，国之福。

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

知此两者亦稽式。

Knowing these two is also knowing the pattern.

常知稽式，是谓玄德。

Always knowing the pattern is called mysterious virtue.

玄德深矣，远矣，

Mysterious virtue is deep, is far-reaching,

与物反矣，

it turns back with all things,

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

江海所以能为百谷之王者，
Rivers and seas can be kings of the hundred valleys

以其善下之，
because they are good at being below them;

故能为百谷之王。
so they can be kings of the hundred valleys.

是以欲上民，必以言下之。
So to be above the people, one must speak as one below them;

欲先民，必以身后之。
to lead the people, one must put oneself behind them.

是以圣人处上而民不重，
So the sage is above, yet the people do not feel his weight;

处前而民不害。
he is in front, yet the people do not feel harmed.

是以天下乐推而不厌，
So the whole world gladly supports him and never tires of him.

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

天下皆谓我道大，

Everyone in the world says my Way is great,

似不肖。

yet it seems unlike anything.

夫唯大，故似不肖。

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

若肖，久矣其细也夫！

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

我有三宝，持而保之。

I have three treasures, which I hold and keep:

一曰慈，二曰俭，

the first is compassion, the second is frugality,

三曰不敢为天下先。

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

慈故能勇，

With compassion, one can be brave;

俭故能广，

with frugality, one can be generous;

不敢为天下先，

not daring to be first in the world,

故能成器长。

one can become the leader of all.

今舍慈且勇，舍俭且广，

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

舍后且先，死矣！

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

夫慈以战则胜，以守则固。

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

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 嗇.

第六十八章 Chapter 68

Not contending

善为士者不武，
A good officer is not warlike;

善战者不怒，
a good fighter is not angry;

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.

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;

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

用兵有言：

Strategists have a saying:

“吾不敢为主而为客，

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

不敢进寸而退尺。”

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

是谓行无行，攘无臂，

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

扔无敌，执无兵。

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

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.

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

吾言甚易知，甚易行。

My words are very easy to understand and very easy to practice.

天下莫能知，莫能行。

Yet no one in the world can understand them, no one can practice them.

言有宗，事有君。

Words have an ancestor; deeds have a master.

夫唯无知，是以不我知。

It is because people do not understand this that they do not understand me.

知我者希，则我者贵。

Those who understand me are few; those who follow me are rare and precious.

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

知不知上，

To know that you do not know is best;

不知知病。

not to know, yet think you know, is a sickness.

夫唯病病，是以不病。

Only by recognizing the sickness as sickness are you free of it.

圣人不病，以其病病，

The sage is not sick, because he recognizes the sickness as sickness;

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

民不畏威，则大威至。

When the people no longer fear authority, a greater terror comes.

无狎其所居，无厌其所生。

Do not cramp their homes; do not press down on their livelihood.

夫唯不厌，是以不厌。

Only if you do not press down on them will they not tire of you.

是以圣人自知不自见，

So the sage knows himself but does not show himself,

自爱不自贵；

loves himself but does not exalt himself.

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

勇于敢则杀，
Bravery in daring leads to death;

勇于不敢则活。
bravery in not daring leads to life.

此两者，或利或害。
Of these two, one benefits and the other harms.

天之所恶，孰知其故？
What heaven loathes, who knows why?

是以圣人犹难之。
So even the sage finds it difficult.

天之道，不争而善胜，
The Way of heaven does not contend, yet is good at winning;

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;

繟然而善谋。
is unhurried, yet is good at planning.

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

民不畏死，
If the people do not fear death,

奈何以死惧之？
why threaten them with death?

若使民常畏死，
If the people always feared death,

而为奇者，
and those who did wrong

吾得执而杀之，
could be seized and killed by me,

孰敢？
who would dare?

常有司杀者杀，
There is always an executioner who kills.

夫代司杀者杀，
To kill in the executioner's place

是谓代大匠斫。
is like cutting wood in the master carpenter's place.

夫代大匠斫者，

Those who cut in the master carpenter's place

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

民之饥，以其上食税之多，

The people go hungry because those above eat up too much in taxes;

是以饥。

that is why they go hungry.

民之难治，以其上之有为，

The people are hard to govern because those above meddle;

是以难治。

that is why they are hard to govern.

民之轻死，

The people make light of death

以其上求生之厚，

because those above seek too much from life;

是以轻死。

that is why they make light of death.

夫唯无以生为者，

Only those who do not live for living

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

人之生也柔弱，其死也坚强。

People are soft and weak when alive, hard and stiff when dead.

万物草木之生也柔脆，

The myriad things, grass and trees, are soft and tender when alive,

其死也枯槁。

dry and withered when dead.

故坚强者死之徒，

So the hard and stiff are companions of death;

柔弱者生之徒。

the soft and weak are companions of life.

是以兵强则不胜，

So an army that is rigid will not win;

木强则兵。

a tree that is rigid will be cut down.

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

天之道，其犹张弓与？

Is the Way of heaven not like drawing a bow?

高者抑之，下者举之；

What is high is pressed down, what is low is raised up;

有余者损之，

what has too much is reduced,

不足者补之。

what has too little is added to.

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.

人之道则不然，

The way of people is not so:

损不足以奉有余。

it takes from those who have too little to give to those who have too much.

孰能有余以奉天下？

Who can take what he has in excess and give it to the world?

唯有道者。

Only one who has the Way.

是以圣人为而不恃，

So the sage acts without expecting,

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

天下莫柔弱于水，
Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water,

而攻坚强者，莫之能胜，
yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing surpasses it,

其无以易之。
for nothing can take its place.

弱之胜强，
The weak overcomes the strong,

柔之胜刚，
the soft overcomes the hard:

天下莫不知莫能行。
everyone in the world knows it, yet no one can practice it.

是以圣人云：
So the sage says:

“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;

受国不祥，是为天下王。”
one who takes on the misfortunes of the state is king of the world."

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

和大怨，必有余怨，

When a great grievance is settled, some grievance always remains;

安可以为善？

how can this be called good?

是以圣人执左契，

So the sage holds the left half of the tally

而不责于人。

but makes no demands on others.

有德司契，无德司彻。

One with virtue keeps the tally; one without virtue collects the dues.

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

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;

使民重死而不远徙。

let the people take death seriously and not travel far.

虽有舟舆，无所乘之；

Though they have boats and carts, they have no need to ride them;

虽有甲兵，无所陈之。

though they have armor and weapons, they have no need to display them.

使人复结绳而用之，

Let people go back to knotting cords to keep records,

甘其食，美其服，

find their food sweet, their clothes beautiful,

安其居，

their homes peaceful,

乐其俗。

and delight in their customs.

邻国相望，鸡犬之声相闻，

Neighboring states can see each other, and hear each other's cocks and dogs,

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

信言不美，美言不信。
True words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not true.

善者不辩，
The good do not argue;

辩者不善。
those who argue are not good.

知者不博，
Those who know are not learned in everything;

博者不知。
those learned in everything do not know.

圣人不积，
The sage does not hoard.

既以为人己愈有，
The more he does for others, the more he has;

既以与人己愈多。
the more he gives to others, the more he gains.

天之道，利而不害；
The Way of heaven benefits and does not harm;

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.