Dao De Jing

LAOZI
c. 4th century BC

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道德經

Translated from the Classical Chinese with AI (Claude) and edited



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CONTENTS

Introduction vii

The Book of the Way 1

The Book of Virtue 11

INTRODUCTION

The *Dao De Jing*, "the classic of the Way and its virtue," is a book of 81 short chapters traditionally attributed to Laozi, "the Old Master," a figure about whom almost nothing is known. It probably took shape in the fourth and third centuries BC, and it is one of the most translated books in the world.

Its subject is the Way, the nameless source of all things, and how to live and govern in harmony with it: by yielding rather than forcing, by emptiness and stillness, by acting without striving. It says all this in paradoxes, images of water, valleys and infants, and lines so compressed that every translation is also an interpretation.

The Chinese is the standard received text, edited with commentary by Wang Bi in the third century AD.

The Book of the Way

道經

Chapters 1–37

The nameless Way, emptiness and stillness, and ruling through non-action.

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1 The Way that can be told is not the constant Way. The name that can be named is not the constant name. Nameless, it is the beginning of heaven and earth. Named, it is the mother of the ten thousand things. So, ever without desire, one sees its mysteries. Ever with desire, one sees its outer edges. These two come out together but differ in name. Together they are called dark. Dark, and darker still: the gate of all mysteries.[1]

2 When all the world knows beauty as beauty, there is already ugliness. When all know the good as good, there is already the not-good. So being and nonbeing give birth to each other. Hard and easy complete each other. Long and short measure each other. High and low lean on each other. Tone and voice harmonize with each other. Front and back follow each other. Therefore the sage abides in the work of non-action and practices the teaching without words. The ten thousand things arise, and the sage does not turn them away. The sage gives life but does not possess, acts but does not rely on it, completes the work but does not dwell in it. Just because the sage does not dwell in it, it never goes away.[2]

3 Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not contend. Do not prize goods that are hard to get, and the people will not

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1 Some punctuate these lines differently: “In constant nonbeing, one would see its mysteries; in constant being, its outer edges.”

steal. Do not display what can be desired, and the people's hearts will not be stirred. Therefore the sage governs by emptying their hearts and filling their bellies, weakening their ambitions and strengthening their bones. Always keep the people without knowledge and without desire, so that the clever do not dare to act. Act through non-action, and nothing will be ungoverned.

4 The Way is empty, yet in use it is never filled. Deep, it seems the ancestor of the ten thousand things. It blunts the sharp, unties the tangles, dims the glare, joins the dust. Limpid, it seems perhaps to be there. I do not know whose child it is. It seems to come before the Lord on High.

5 Heaven and earth are not humane: they treat the ten thousand things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane: the sage treats the people as straw dogs. The space between heaven and earth—is it not like a bellows? Empty, yet never exhausted. The more it moves, the more comes out. Many words soon run dry. Better to hold to the center.[3]

6 The valley spirit never dies. It is called the dark female. The gate of the dark female is called the root of heaven and earth. Unbroken, it seems to be there. Draw on it, and it is never exhausted.

7 Heaven is lasting; earth endures. Heaven and earth can last and endure because they do not live for themselves. So they can live long. Therefore the sage puts self last and so comes first, puts self aside and so is preserved. Is it not because the sage has no self-interest that the sage's own interests are fulfilled?

8 The highest good is like water. Water is good at benefiting the ten thousand things and does not contend. It settles in places everyone disdains, and so it is close to the Way. In dwelling, the good lies in the ground. In the heart, the good lies in depth. In giving, the good lies in humaneness. In speech, the good lies in trust. In governing, the good lies in order. In work,

2 Non-action (wuwei): acting without forcing, letting things take their own course.
3 Straw dogs were ritual offerings, treated with reverence during a sacrifice and thrown away after it.

the good lies in ability. In action, the good lies in timing. Just because it does not contend, it incurs no blame.

9 Hold it and fill it to the brim? Better to stop in time. Hammer a blade to a sharp point, and it cannot keep its edge long. A hall full of gold and jade—no one can guard it. Rich, honored, and arrogant, one brings blame on oneself. When the work is done, withdraw: this is the Way of heaven.

10 Bearing the soul and embracing the One, can you keep them from parting? Concentrating the breath and becoming soft, can you be like an infant? Cleansing the dark mirror, can you leave it without a flaw? Loving the state and governing the people, can you be without knowing? As heaven's gates open and close, can you play the female? With clear understanding reaching in all four directions, can you practice non-action? Give them life and nurture them. Give life but do not possess, act but do not rely on it, lead but do not control. This is called dark virtue.[4]

11 Thirty spokes share one hub. Where there is nothing, the cart has its use. Clay is shaped into a vessel. Where there is nothing, the vessel has its use. Doors and windows are cut to make a room. Where there is nothing, the room has its use. So being makes for benefit; nonbeing makes for use.

12 The five colors blind the eye. The five tones deafen the ear. The five flavors dull the palate. Racing and hunting madden the heart. Goods hard to get lead conduct astray. Therefore the sage is for the belly, not for the eye. So the sage lets go of that and takes this.

13 Favor and disgrace are alike alarming. Prize great trouble as you prize the body. What does "favor and disgrace are alike alarming" mean? Favor is lowly. Getting it is alarming; losing it is alarming. That is what "favor and disgrace are alike alarming" means. What does "prize great trouble as you prize the body" mean? The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. If I had no body, what trouble would I have? So whoever prizes the

4 Virtue (de): the power a thing has by following the Way, not virtue in a narrowly moral sense.

body as if it were the world can be entrusted with the world. Whoever loves the body as if it were the world can be given the world.

14 Looked at but not seen, it is called the invisible. Listened to but not heard, it is called the inaudible. Grasped at but not caught, it is called the intangible. These three cannot be fathomed, so they merge and become one. Above, it is not bright. Below, it is not dim. Unending, unbroken, it cannot be named, and it returns again to no-thing. This is called the shape without shape, the image of no-thing. It is called elusive and vague. Meet it, and you do not see its head. Follow it, and you do not see its back. Hold to the Way of old to master what is here today. To know the ancient beginning is called the thread of the Way.

15 The finest scholars of old were subtle, wondrous, dark, and penetrating, too deep to be known. Just because they could not be known, I will try to describe them. Hesitant, as if crossing a river in winter. Wary, as if fearing neighbors on all sides. Reserved, like guests. Yielding, like ice about to melt. Simple, like the uncarved block. Open, like a valley. Murky, like muddy water. Who can take the muddy and, through stillness, slowly make it clear? Who can take what is at rest and, through long movement, slowly bring it to life? Those who keep this Way do not wish to be full. Just because they are not full, they can grow worn without being made new.[5]

16 Reach the utmost emptiness. Keep stillness steadfast. The ten thousand things rise together, and I watch them return. Things flourish in profusion, and each returns to its root. Returning to the root is called stillness. This is called returning to one's destiny. Returning to one's destiny is called the constant. Knowing the constant is called clarity. Not knowing the constant, one acts wildly, to disaster. Knowing the constant, one embraces all. Embracing all, one is impartial. Impartial, one is complete. Complete, one is heaven. Heaven, one is the Way. The

5 The uncarved block (pu): raw, unworked wood, an image of simplicity before anything is shaped or named.

Way, one endures. To the end of one's days, one is free from danger.

17 The best rulers: those below simply know they are there. The next: people love and praise them. The next: people fear them. The next: people despise them. When trust falls short, there is distrust. Unhurried, the best are sparing with their words. The work is done, the task accomplished, and the people all say, "It happened of itself."[6]

18 When the great Way is abandoned, there are humaneness and rightness. When cleverness and wisdom appear, there is great falsehood. When the six relations are out of harmony, there are filial piety and kindness. When the state is in darkness and disorder, there are loyal ministers.

19 Cut off sageliness, discard cleverness, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Cut off humaneness, discard rightness, and the people will return to filial piety and kindness. Cut off craft, discard profit, and thieves and robbers will disappear. These three, as refinements, are not enough. So let the people have something to hold to: show plainness, embrace the uncarved block, lessen self-interest, reduce desire.

20 Cut off learning, and there will be no worry. "Yes" and "uh-huh"—how far apart are they? Good and bad—how far apart are they? What others fear, one cannot fail to fear. How vast, and still without end! The crowd is merry, as if feasting at a great sacrifice, as if climbing a terrace in spring. I alone am placid, showing no sign, like an infant that has not yet smiled. Weary, weary, as if with nowhere to return. The crowd all have more than enough; I alone seem to have lost out. Mine is the heart of a fool! So muddled. Ordinary people are bright and clear; I alone am dim. Ordinary people are sharp and exacting; I alone am dull and closed. Calm, like the sea. Drifting, as if without rest. The crowd all have their uses; I alone am stubborn and rustic. I alone differ from others: I prize being fed by the mother.[7]

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6 So of itself (ziran): literally "self-so," what is as it is without being made so. The people's words here are literally "We are self-so."

7 "Yes" (wei) was the respectful reply, "uh-huh" (e) the careless one.

[21] The bearing of great virtue follows the Way alone. The Way, as a thing, is vague and elusive. Elusive, vague—within it there is an image. Vague, elusive—within it there is a thing. Deep and obscure—within it there is an essence. This essence is utterly real; within it there is something to trust. From now back to antiquity, its name has not departed, and by it we survey the origins of all things. How do I know the nature of the origins of all things? By this.

[22] Bend, and be whole. Be crooked, and be straight. Be hollow, and be full. Be worn, and be new. Have little, and gain. Have much, and be confused. Therefore the sage embraces the One and becomes the model for the world. Not displaying self, the sage is clear. Not self-righteous, the sage is distinguished. Not boasting, the sage has merit. Not proud, the sage endures. Just because the sage does not contend, no one in the world can contend with the sage. The old saying "Bend, and be whole"—how could it be empty words? Truly, wholeness returns to such a one.

[23] To speak little is so of itself. So a whirlwind does not last all morning; a downpour does not last all day. Who makes them? Heaven and earth. If even heaven and earth cannot make things last, how much less can people? So in following the Way: those of the Way are one with the Way. Those of virtue are one with virtue. Those of loss are one with loss. Those one with the Way, the Way is glad to receive. Those one with virtue, virtue is glad to receive. Those one with loss, loss is glad to receive. When trust falls short, there is distrust.

[24] Those on tiptoe do not stand firm. Those who stride do not go far. Those who display themselves are not clear. Those who are self-righteous are not distinguished. Those who boast have no merit. Those who are proud do not endure. Measured by the Way, these are called leftover food and useless deeds. Things may well detest them, so one who has the Way does not dwell with them.

[25] There is a thing, blended and complete, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change. It moves in a circle and does not tire. It could be the mother of

the world. I do not know its name. I call it the Way. Forced to name it, I call it great. Great means going on. Going on means far away. Far away means returning. So the Way is great, heaven is great, earth is great, and the king too is great. In the realm there are four greats, and the king is one of them. People model themselves on earth. Earth models itself on heaven. Heaven models itself on the Way. The Way models itself on what is so of itself.

[26] The heavy is the root of the light. Stillness is the master of restlessness. Therefore the sage travels all day without leaving the baggage carts. Though there are splendid sights, the sage stays at ease, above it all. How can a lord of ten thousand chariots treat their own person lightly before the world? Be light, and you lose the root. Be restless, and you lose the master.

[27] Good walking leaves no tracks. Good speaking leaves no flaw to fault. Good counting needs no tallies. Good shutting needs no bolt, yet what is shut cannot be opened. Good tying needs no cord, yet what is tied cannot be undone. Therefore the sage is always good at saving people, so no one is cast away; always good at saving things, so nothing is cast away. This is called cloaked clarity. So the good person is the teacher of the one who is not good. The one who is not good is the resource of the good person. Not to value one's teacher, not to love one's resource—however clever, one is greatly lost. This is called the essential mystery.

[28] Know the male, keep to the female, and be the ravine of the world. Being the ravine of the world, constant virtue never leaves, and you return to being an infant. Know the white, keep to the black, and be the model for the world. Being the model for the world, constant virtue never errs, and you return to the limitless. Know glory, keep to disgrace, and be the valley of the world. Being the valley of the world, constant virtue is sufficient, and you return to the uncarved block. When the uncarved block is split, it becomes vessels. The sage uses them and becomes chief of the officials. So great shaping does no cutting.

29 Those who would win the world by acting on it—I see that they cannot succeed. The world is a sacred vessel. It cannot be acted on. Those who act on it ruin it. Those who grasp it lose it. So among things, some lead and some follow, some breathe gently and some blow hard, some are strong and some are frail, some break and some fall. Therefore the sage lets go of the extreme, the extravagant, the excessive.

30 One who assists a ruler of people with the Way does not use arms to be strong over the world. Such things tend to come back. Where armies camp, thorns and brambles grow. After great wars, there are sure to be years of hunger. The skilled achieve a result and stop. They do not dare to use it to seize strength. Achieve the result, but do not brag. Achieve the result, but do not boast. Achieve the result, but do not be arrogant. Achieve the result only because there is no choice. Achieve the result, but do not force. When things reach their prime, they grow old. This is called not the Way. What is not the Way soon ends.

31 Fine weapons are instruments of ill omen. Things may well detest them, so one who has the Way does not dwell with them. At home, the noble person honors the left; at war, the right. Weapons are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of the noble person. When there is no choice but to use them, calm detachment is best. Victory is not beautiful. To find it beautiful is to delight in killing people. One who delights in killing people cannot get what they want in the world. In auspicious affairs the left is honored; in inauspicious affairs, the right. The lieutenant general stands on the left; the commanding general stands on the right. This means war is treated as a funeral rite. When many people have been killed, weep for them in grief and sorrow. A victory in war is treated as a funeral rite.[8]

32 The Way is constant and nameless. Though the uncarved block is small, no one in the world can make it a subject. If lords and kings could keep to it, the ten thousand things would sub-

8 The left was the place of honor on happy occasions, the right at funerals; placing the commanding general on the right frames war as mourning.

mit of themselves. Heaven and earth would join and let fall sweet dew. With no one commanding them, the people would be even of themselves. Once shaping begins, there are names. Once there are names, one must know when to stop. Knowing when to stop, one is free from danger. The Way in the world is like valley streams flowing to the rivers and the sea.

[33] Knowing others is intelligence. Knowing oneself is clarity. Overcoming others is force. Overcoming oneself is strength. Knowing what is enough is wealth. Pressing on is will. Not losing one's place is lasting. To die but not perish is long life.

[34] The great Way flows everywhere. It can go left or right. The ten thousand things rely on it for life, and it does not turn them away. It completes its work but claims nothing. It clothes and feeds the ten thousand things but does not act as their master. Always without desire, it can be called small. The ten thousand things return to it, yet it does not act as their master: it can be called great. Because it never tries to be great, it can achieve its greatness.

[35] Hold fast to the great image, and the world will come. It comes and meets no harm: peace, calm, and ease. Music and good food make passing travelers stop. But the Way, when it passes the lips, is bland and has no flavor. Look at it, and there is not enough to see. Listen to it, and there is not enough to hear. Use it, and it cannot be used up.

[36] If you would shrink it, you must first stretch it. If you would weaken it, you must first strengthen it. If you would cast it down, you must first raise it up. If you would take from it, you must first give to it. This is called subtle clarity. The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong. Fish must not be let out of the deep. The sharp tools of the state must not be shown to others.

[37] The Way is constantly in non-action, yet nothing is left undone. If lords and kings could keep to it, the ten thousand things would transform of themselves. If, as they transform, desire arises, I will calm it with the nameless uncarved block. With the nameless uncarved block, there will be no desire.

Without desire, there is stillness, and the world will settle of itself.

The Book of Virtue

德經

Chapters 38–81

True virtue, humility and yielding, and how the sage governs by not meddling.

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[38] The highest virtue is not virtuous, and so it has virtue. The lowest virtue never lets go of virtue, and so it has no virtue. The highest virtue practices non-action and has nothing to act for. The lowest virtue acts and has something to act for. The highest humaneness acts, but has nothing to act for. The highest rightness acts, and has something to act for. The highest ritual propriety acts, and when no one responds, it rolls up its sleeves and drags them to it. So when the Way is lost, there is virtue. When virtue is lost, there is humaneness. When humaneness is lost, there is rightness. When rightness is lost, there is ritual propriety. Ritual propriety is the thinning of loyalty and trust and the beginning of disorder. Foreknowledge is the flower of the Way and the beginning of folly. Therefore the great person dwells in the thick, not the thin; dwells in the fruit, not the flower. So one lets go of that and takes this.

[39] Of old, these attained the One. Heaven attained the One and became clear. Earth attained the One and became settled. Spirits attained the One and became potent. Valleys attained the One and became full. The ten thousand things attained the One and came to life. Lords and kings attained the One and became the standard of the world. It is the One that brings this about. Heaven, without what makes it clear, might split. Earth, without what makes it settled, might erupt. Spirits, without what makes

them potent, might fade. Valleys, without what makes them full, might run dry. The ten thousand things, without what makes them live, might perish. Lords and kings, without what makes them noble and high, might fall. So the noble take the humble as their root; the high take the low as their foundation. That is why lords and kings call themselves "the orphaned," "the lonely," "the unworthy." Is this not taking the humble as the root? Is it not? So strive for too much honor and you have no honor. Do not wish to glitter like jade or rattle like stone.[1]

40 Returning is the movement of the Way. Weakness is the use of the Way. The ten thousand things of the world are born from being. Being is born from nonbeing.

41 When the best scholars hear of the Way, they practice it with diligence. When average scholars hear of the Way, they half keep it and half lose it. When the lowest scholars hear of the Way, they laugh out loud. If they did not laugh, it would not be the Way. So the established sayings have it: The bright Way seems dim. The Way forward seems to retreat. The smooth Way seems rough. The highest virtue seems like a valley. The purest white seems soiled. Ample virtue seems lacking. Firm virtue seems slack. Pure substance seems to change. The great square has no corners. The great vessel is finished late. The great sound is faint. The great image has no form. The Way is hidden and nameless. Only the Way is good at giving and completing.

42 The Way gives birth to one. One gives birth to two. Two gives birth to three. Three gives birth to the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang, and by blending their breath they reach harmony. What people hate most is to be "orphaned," "lonely," "unworthy," yet kings and dukes call themselves by these names. So things are sometimes increased by being diminished, and sometimes diminished by being increased. What others teach, I teach too:

1 "The orphaned," "the lonely," and "the unworthy" were self-deprecating terms that rulers used to refer to themselves.

"The violent do not die a natural death." I will take this as the father of my teaching.[2]

43 The softest thing in the world gallops through the hardest thing in the world. What has no substance enters where there is no gap. From this I know the benefit of non-action. The teaching without words, the benefit of non-action—few in the world attain them.

44 Fame or self: which is dearer? Self or wealth: which counts for more? Gain or loss: which does more harm? So great love must cost dearly; much hoarding must end in heavy loss. Know what is enough, and you will not be disgraced. Know when to stop, and you will be free from danger. Then you can last long.

45 Great perfection seems flawed, yet its use never wears out. Great fullness seems empty, yet its use never runs out. Great straightness seems bent, yet its use is never fixed. Great skill seems clumsy, yet its use never stops. Great eloquence seems halting, yet its use never errs. Restlessness overcomes cold; stillness overcomes heat. Clarity and stillness set the world right.

46 When the world has the Way, galloping horses are sent back to manure the fields. When the world lacks the Way, warhorses are bred on the outskirts. No disaster is greater than not knowing what is enough. No fault is greater than the desire to gain. So to know that enough is enough is always to have enough.

47 Without going out the door, one knows the world. Without looking out the window, one sees the Way of heaven. The farther one goes, the less one knows. Therefore the sage knows without traveling, names without seeing, accomplishes without acting.

48 In pursuing learning, one gains every day. In pursuing the Way, one loses every day. Lose and lose again, until one arrives at non-action. Practice non-action, and nothing is left undone. The world is always won by not meddling. Once one meddles, one is not fit to win the world.

49 The sage has no constant heart, and takes the heart of the people as the sage's own. Those who are good, I treat as good.

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2 Yin and yang: the dark, receptive and the bright, active aspects present in all things.

Those who are not good, I also treat as good. Such virtue is goodness. Those who are trustworthy, I trust. Those who are not trustworthy, I also trust. Such virtue is trust. The sage lives in the world withdrawn, and for the world's sake keeps the heart undivided. The people all strain their eyes and ears; the sage treats them all as children.

50 Coming out is life; going in is death. The companions of life are three in ten. The companions of death are three in ten. And those who live but move toward the place of death are also three in ten. Why is this? Because they cling so hard to living. I have heard that those good at keeping life travel by land without meeting rhinoceros or tiger, and go among armies without facing armor and weapons. The rhinoceros finds no place to drive its horn, the tiger no place to set its claws, the weapon no place to lodge its blade. Why is this? Because they have no place of death.[3]

51 The Way gives them life. Virtue nurtures them. Things give them shape. Circumstances complete them. So among the ten thousand things, none fails to revere the Way and prize virtue. The Way is revered and virtue prized not because anyone commands it, but because it is always so of itself. So the Way gives them life, and virtue nurtures them. It raises them and rears them, settles them and ripens them, shelters them and covers them. It gives life but does not possess, acts but does not rely on it, leads but does not control. This is called dark virtue.

52 The world has a beginning, which is the mother of the world. Once you have the mother, you know the children. Once you know the children, hold fast again to the mother, and to the end of your days you will be free from danger. Block the openings, shut the gates, and to the end of your life you will not be exhausted. Unblock the openings, pile up affairs, and to the end of your life you cannot be saved. Seeing the small is called clarity. Keeping to the soft is called strength. Use the light, return to

3 "Three in ten" can also be read "thirteen," which some early commentators took as the four limbs and nine openings of the body.

clarity, and leave yourself no disaster. This is called practicing the constant.

53 If I had even a little knowledge, walking the great Way, I would fear only straying from it. The great Way is very level, but people love side paths. The court is spotless; the fields are overgrown; the granaries are empty. They wear embroidered robes, carry sharp swords, gorge on food and drink, and have wealth to spare. This is called the boasting of robbers. It is surely not the Way!

54 What is well planted cannot be uprooted. What is well embraced cannot slip away. Children and grandchildren will keep up the sacrifices without end. Cultivate it in yourself, and virtue will be genuine. Cultivate it in the family, and virtue will be ample. Cultivate it in the village, and virtue will be lasting. Cultivate it in the state, and virtue will be abundant. Cultivate it in the world, and virtue will be everywhere. So look at the self through the self, the family through the family, the village through the village, the state through the state, the world through the world. How do I know the world is so? By this.

55 One who holds virtue in abundance is like a newborn child. Wasps, scorpions, and snakes do not sting it. Fierce beasts do not seize it. Birds of prey do not strike it. Its bones are weak and its sinews soft, yet its grip is firm. It does not yet know the union of female and male, yet its member stirs: this is the height of vital essence. It cries all day and does not grow hoarse: this is the height of harmony. Knowing harmony is called the constant. Knowing the constant is called clarity. Forcing life is called ill-omened. When the heart drives the breath, it is called forcing. When things reach their prime, they grow old. This is called not the Way. What is not the Way soon ends.

56 Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know. Block the openings, shut the gates, blunt the sharp, untie the tangles, dim the glare, join the dust. This is called dark oneness. So such a one cannot be drawn close and cannot be kept at a distance, cannot be benefited and cannot be harmed, cannot

be honored and cannot be demeaned. So such a one is the most honored in the world.

[57] Govern the state with the upright. Wage war with the unexpected. Win the world by not meddling. How do I know it is so? By this. The more taboos and prohibitions in the world, the poorer the people. The more sharp tools the people have, the more the state falls into darkness. The more skill and cunning people have, the more strange things arise. The more laws and orders are proclaimed, the more thieves and robbers there are. So the sage says: "I practice non-action, and the people transform of themselves. I love stillness, and the people become upright of themselves. I do not meddle, and the people grow rich of themselves. I am without desire, and the people become the uncarved block of themselves."

[58] When the government is dull and closed, the people are simple and honest. When the government is sharp and exacting, the people are divided and wanting. Disaster—good fortune leans on it. Good fortune—disaster hides in it. Who knows where it ends? There is no fixed norm. The upright turns back into the unexpected; the good turns back into the monstrous. People have been lost in confusion for a long time indeed. Therefore the sage is square but does not cut, has edges but does not wound, is straight but not unrestrained, is bright but not dazzling.

[59] In governing people and serving heaven, nothing is better than being sparing. Just by being sparing, one submits early. Submitting early means accumulating virtue again and again. Accumulating virtue again and again, there is nothing one cannot overcome. When there is nothing one cannot overcome, no one knows one's limits. When no one knows one's limits, one can hold the state. Holding the mother of the state, one can last long. This is called deep roots and a firm stem, the Way of long life and lasting sight.

[60] Governing a great state is like cooking a small fish. When the Way presides over the world, its ghosts have no spiritual power. It is not that its ghosts have no spiritual power, but that

their power does not harm people. It is not that their power does not harm people, but that the sage also does not harm people. Since neither harms the other, virtue flows back to both.

61 A great state is the lower stream, where the world converges. It is the female of the world. The female always overcomes the male by stillness, and by stillness takes the lower place. So if a great state places itself below a small state, it wins the small state. If a small state places itself below a great state, it wins the great state. So one lowers itself in order to win; the other is low and so wins. A great state wants nothing more than to unite and shelter others. A small state wants nothing more than to join and serve others. If both are to get what they want, the great one should take the lower place.

62 The Way is the hidden sanctuary of the ten thousand things. It is the treasure of the good and the refuge of those who are not good. Fine words can be traded. Honorable conduct can raise one above others. Even if people are not good, why cast them away? So when the Son of Heaven is enthroned and the three ministers are installed, though one might offer a jade disc held in both hands, followed by a team of four horses, it is not as good as sitting still and offering this Way. Why did the ancients value this Way? Is it not said that by it those who seek will find, and those who have done wrong will be spared? So it is the most honored in the world.

63 Act through non-action. Make not meddling your business. Taste the tasteless. Great or small, many or few, repay resentment with virtue. Plan for the difficult while it is easy. Do the great while it is small. The difficult affairs of the world must begin with the easy. The great affairs of the world must begin with the small. Therefore the sage never tries to be great, and so can achieve greatness. Light promises must inspire little trust. Taking much as easy must lead to much difficulty. Therefore even the sage treats things as difficult, and so in the end has no difficulty.

64 What is at rest is easy to hold. What has not yet shown a sign is easy to plan for. What is brittle is easy to break. What is

minute is easy to scatter. Act on it before it exists. Put it in order before disorder arises. A tree that fills the arms grows from a tiny shoot. A tower of nine stories rises from a heap of earth. A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet. Those who act on it ruin it. Those who grasp it lose it. Therefore the sage practices non-action and so ruins nothing, does not grasp and so loses nothing. People in their affairs often ruin things when they are nearly complete. Be as careful at the end as at the beginning, and nothing will be ruined. Therefore the sage desires not to desire, and does not prize goods that are hard to get; learns not to learn, and returns to what the crowd has passed by. So the sage helps the ten thousand things be so of themselves, and does not dare to act.

65 Those of old who were good at practicing the Way did not use it to make the people bright, but to keep them unsophisticated. The people are hard to govern because they have too much cleverness. So to govern the state with cleverness is to rob the state. Not to govern the state with cleverness is the state's good fortune. To know these two is also to know the standard. Always to know the standard is called dark virtue. Dark virtue is deep, far-reaching, and returns with things, and then it reaches the great accord.[4]

66 Rivers and seas can be kings of the hundred valleys because they are good at staying below them. So they can be kings of the hundred valleys. So whoever wishes to be above the people must speak as one below them. Whoever wishes to lead the people must stand behind them. Therefore the sage dwells above, and the people do not feel the weight; stands in front, and the people do not feel harmed. So the world gladly pushes the sage forward and never tires of it. Because the sage does not contend, no one in the world can contend with the sage.

67 All the world says my Way is great but resembles nothing. Just because it is great, it resembles nothing. If it resembled anything, it would long since have become small. I have three treas-

4 Yu, rendered "keep them unsophisticated," literally means "make them foolish." Wang Bi reads it as keeping the people artless, without scheming knowledge.

ures that I hold and keep. The first is compassion. The second is frugality. The third is not daring to be first in the world. With compassion, one can be brave. With frugality, one can be generous. Not daring to be first in the world, one can become the chief of all vessels. Now to give up compassion and yet be brave, to give up frugality and yet be generous, to give up being last and yet be first—that is death! With compassion, one wins in attack and holds firm in defense. When heaven would save someone, it guards them with compassion.

68 One good at being an officer is not warlike. One good at fighting does not get angry. One good at defeating enemies does not engage them. One good at using people places oneself below them. This is called the virtue of not contending. This is called using the strength of others. This is called matching heaven, the highest of old.

69 Those who use arms have a saying: "I do not dare be the host, but rather the guest. I do not dare advance an inch, but rather retreat a foot." This is called marching without marching, rolling up sleeves without arms, dragging without an enemy, grasping without weapons. No disaster is greater than taking the enemy lightly. Taking the enemy lightly nearly costs me my treasures. So when opposing armies meet, the side that grieves will win.[5]

70 My words are very easy to understand and very easy to practice. Yet no one in the world can understand them, and no one can practice them. Words have an ancestor; deeds have a master. Just because people do not understand this, they do not understand me. Those who understand me are few, and those who follow me are precious. Therefore the sage wears coarse cloth and carries jade within.

71 To know that one does not know is best. Not to know, yet think one knows, is a sickness. Just because one sees sickness as sickness, one is not sick. The sage is not sick, because the sage sees sickness as sickness. That is why the sage is not sick.

5 The host is the side that starts the fighting; the guest is the side that only responds.

72 When the people do not fear authority, a greater terror will come. Do not crowd them in their dwellings. Do not oppress them in their livelihood. Just because you do not oppress them, they will not weary of you. Therefore the sage has self-knowledge but no self-display, self-love but no self-exaltation. So the sage lets go of that and takes this.

73 Brave in daring, one is killed. Brave in not daring, one lives. Of these two, one benefits and one harms. What heaven hates—who knows why? Therefore even the sage treats it as difficult. The Way of heaven does not contend, yet is good at winning; does not speak, yet is good at responding; is not summoned, yet comes of itself; is unhurried, yet good at planning. Heaven's net is vast. Its mesh is wide, yet nothing slips through.

74 If the people do not fear death, why threaten them with death? If the people were made always to fear death, and someone behaved perversely, and I could seize and kill them, who would dare? There is always an official executioner who kills. To kill in place of the official executioner is called cutting wood in place of the master carpenter. Of those who cut in place of the master carpenter, few do not injure their hands.

75 The people starve because those above them eat up too much in taxes. That is why they starve. The people are hard to govern because those above them keep acting. That is why they are hard to govern. The people take death lightly because those above them seek life too richly. That is why they take death lightly. Those who do not make living their aim are wiser than those who prize life.

76 When people are born, they are soft and weak. When they die, they are hard and strong. When the ten thousand things, the grasses and trees, are alive, they are soft and supple. When they die, they are withered and dry. So the hard and strong are companions of death; the soft and weak are companions of life. Therefore when an army is strong, it does not win. When a tree is strong, it meets the axe. The strong and great take the lower place; the soft and weak take the higher.

77 The Way of heaven—is it not like drawing a bow? What is high is pulled down; what is low is raised up. What has too much is reduced; what has too little is added to. The Way of heaven reduces what has too much and adds to what has too little. The way of people is not so. It reduces those who have too little to serve those who have too much. Who can take what they have in excess and offer it to the world? Only one who has the Way. Therefore the sage acts but does not rely on it, completes the work but does not dwell in it, and has no wish to display worth.

78 Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it, for nothing can take its place. That the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard—everyone in the world knows it, yet no one can practice it. Therefore the sage says: "Whoever takes on the filth of the state is called lord of its altars. Whoever takes on the misfortunes of the state is called king of the world." True words seem to say the opposite.

79 When a great resentment is settled, some resentment is sure to remain. How can this be counted good? Therefore the sage holds the left half of the tally but makes no demands on others. Those with virtue keep the tally. Those without virtue collect the dues. The Way of heaven has no favorites. It always sides with the good.[6]

80 A small state with few people. Let there be tools that do the work of ten or a hundred, yet let them go unused. Let the people take death seriously and not move far away. Though they have boats and carts, let there be no occasion to ride them. Though they have armor and weapons, let there be no occasion to display them. Let people return to knotting cords and using them. Let them savor their food, find their clothes beautiful, be at peace in their homes, and delight in their customs. Neighboring states can see each other and hear each other's roosters and

6 Agreements were recorded on tallies split in two; the left half entitled its holder to claim what was owed.

dogs, yet the people grow old and die without ever visiting one another.[7]

81 True words are not beautiful. Beautiful words are not true. The good do not argue. Those who argue are not good. Those who know are not learned. Those who are learned do not know. The sage does not hoard. Having done everything for others, the sage has more. Having given everything to others, the sage has still more. The Way of heaven benefits and does not harm. The way of the sage acts and does not contend.

7 Knotted cords were used to keep records before writing.