

THE WAY OF LIFE [Dao De Jing] Lao Tzu.

A translation of the Tao Tê Ching, by R.B. BLAKNEY (1955).

Part II. [DE, Life].**38 Shang te pu te**

A man of highest virtue
Will not display it as his own;
His virtue then is real.
Low virtue makes one miss no chance
To show his virtue off;
His virtue then is nought.
High virtue is at rest;
It knows no need to act.
Low virtue is a busyness
Pretending to accomplishment.

Compassion at its best
Consists in honest deeds;
Morality at best
Is something done, aforethought;
High etiquette, when acted out
Without response from others,
Constrains a man to bare his arms
And make them do their duty!

Truly, once the Way is lost,
There comes then virtue;
Virtue lost, comes then compassion;
After that morality;
And when that's lost, there's etiquette,
The husk of all good faith,
The rising point of anarchy.

Foreknowledge is, they say,
The Doctrine* come to flower;
But better yet, it is
The starting point of silliness.
So once full-grown, a man will take
The meat and not the husk,
The fruit and not the flower.
Rejecting one, he takes the other.

[* i.e., Confucian doctrine, the ascendant orthodoxy. See *Analects* 2:23, "Whatever others may succeed the Chou, their character, even a hundred ages hence, can be known."]

39 Hsi chih te i che

These things in ancient times received the One:

The sky obtained it and was clarified;
The earth received it and was settled firm;
The spirits got it and were energized;
The valleys had it, filled to overflow;
All things, as they partook it came alive;
The nobles and the king imbibed the One
In order that the realm might upright be;
Such things were then accomplished by the One.

Without its clarity the sky might break;
Except it were set firm, the earth might shake;
Without their energy the gods would pass;
Unless kept full, the valleys might go dry;
Except for life, all things would pass away;
Unless the One did lift and hold them high,
The nobles and the king might trip and fall.

The humble folk support the mighty ones;
They are base on which the highest rest.
The nobles and the king speak of themselves
As "orphans," "desolate" and "needy ones."
Does this not indicate that they depend
Upon the lowly people for support?

Truly, a cart is more than the sum of its parts.

Better to rumble like rocks
Than to tinkle like jade.

COMMENT

The use of "the One" as a synonym for the Way indicates the unifying character of the Way. This poem is an assertion that the Way is immanent everywhere.

40 Fan che tao chih tung

The movement of the Way is a return;
 In weakness lies its major usefulness.
 From What-is all the world of things was born
 But What-is sprang in turn from What-is-not.

COMMENT

The first line simply reasserts Poem 25, line 12, or the first part of Poem 16. It is worth noting that while Chinese custom set the Golden Age in the past, this "return" does not necessarily mean going back by imitating the primitive ancients. The mystic in China, as elsewhere, was interested in exploring the roots as well as the fruits of life, in an effort to know the ultimate truth about himself and everything else. It is rather a return to "within" one's self, where the ultimate mystery of being can eventually be confronted.

The "weakness" of the Way is like the "weakness" of Jesus on trial. Poem 8, line 1, however, describes the highest goodness as being like water. Poem 76, line 11: "The soft and yielding rise above them all."

"What-is," or being, is the "mother" or matrix of Poem 1, line 1. "What-is-not" or non-being, is described more at length in Poem 25, lines 1-5. It is the Way, the "preface to God."

41 Shang shih wen tao

On hearing of the Way, the best of men
 Will earnestly explore its length.
 The mediocre person learns of it
 And takes it up and sets it down.
 But vulgar people, when they hear the news,
 Will laugh out loud, and if they did not laugh,
 It would not be the Way.

And so there is a proverb:

"When going looks like coming back,
 The clearest road is mighty dark."

Today, the Way that's plain looks rough,
 And lofty virtue like a chasm;
 The purest innocence like shame,
 The broadest power not enough,
 Established goodness knavery,
 Substantial worth like shifting tides.

Great space has no corners;
 Great powers come late;

Great music is soft sound;
The great Form no shape.

The Way is obscure and unnamed;
It is a skilled investor, nonetheless,
The master of accomplishment.

PARALLELS

"Many are called but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

"Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people." (Isaiah 60:2)

"To whom then will you liken me, or shall I be equal?" (Isaiah 40:25)

"Yet he gave to as many as took him

The power to be Children of God." (John 1:12)

42 Tao sheng i

The Way begot one,
And the one, two;
Then the two begot three
And three, all else.

All things bear the shade on their backs
And the sun in their arms;
By the blending of breath
From the sun and the shade,
Equilibrium comes to the world.

Orphaned, or needy, or desolate, these
Are conditions much feared and disliked,
Yet in public address, the king
And the nobles account themselves thus.
So a loss sometimes benefits one
Or a benefit proves to be loss.

What others have taught
I also shall teach:
If a violent man does not come
To a violent death,
I shall choose him to teach me.

COMMENT

There is a passage in *Chuang Tzu* (chap. 2) from which the first stanza is adapted: "The world and I have a common origin and all creatures and I together are one. Being one, our oneness can be expressed . . . or unexpressed. The one, with the expression, makes two, and the two, with one (what is unexpressed), make three. From there on...." Here is a triad: the world of things, what can be said of it, and what cannot be said of it.

The second stanza introduces the Yin-Yang cognates as shade and sun, their "breaths" being cold or warm. The third stanza is a play on the conventional speech of royalty. The fourth stanza may refer to one of Mo Ti's approved doctrines: violence is evil.

43 T'ien hsia chih

The softest of stuff in the world
Penetrates quickly the hardest;
Insubstantial, it enters
Where no room is.

By this I know the benefit
Of something done by quiet being;
In all the world but few can know
Accomplishment apart from work,
Instruction when no words are used.

PARAPHRASE

On the analogy of water, the softest stuff, penetrating rocks, the insubstantial Way gets into everything, even when it seems that there is no place for it.

Yet neither water nor the Way attempt this penetration; it happens without effort, without doing on the part of the Way or resistance on the part of whatever is penetrated. The creature simply gives up to its Creator.

44 Ming yü shen

Which is dearer, fame or self?
Which is worth more, man or pelf?
Which would hurt more, gain or loss?

The mean man pays the highest price;
The hoarder takes the greatest loss;
A man content is never shamed,
And self-restrained, is not in danger
He will live forever.

There is a neat symmetry about this piece. The mean man pays the highest price because he trades virtue for gain. The hoarder takes the greatest loss because he accumulates self in preference to virtue. The "man content" has virtue and is self-restrained and so is never in danger from shame or death.

45 Ta ch'eng je ch'üeh

Most perfect, yet it seems
Imperfect, incomplete:
Its use is not impaired.
Filled up, and yet it seems
Poured out, an empty void:
It never will run dry.

The straightest, yet it seems
To deviate, to bend;
The highest skill and yet
It looks like clumsiness.
The utmost eloquence,
It sounds like stammering.*

As movement overcomes
The cold, and stillness, heat,
The Wise Man, pure and still,
Will rectify the world.

PARAPHRASE

The Way, unnamed, though ideal for every good purpose, seems to ordinary observers both defective and stupid. Nevertheless, by means of it, the king can bring order and probity to the world. *Comment:* In this poem, as in others in this collection, the thought is paradoxical, but the paradox asserts the contrast between appearance and reality: the common-sense judgments of men rest on appearances and are contradicted by reality. This point of view is parallel to that of the Divine Comedy of Dante, or the gospel: God and man do not always see eye to eye: what God makes perfect may seem imperfect to the human observer, and vice versa. Paradox is generally characteristic of mystic writing, from which drama and high comedy are seldom missing. Indeed, the paradox of the mystic is really germinal drama that fired the imaginations of China's artists and writers.

[* See Exodus 4:10, "Moses said . . . 'but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.'" Also see *Analects* 4:24, "The aristocrat likes to be slow of speech and prompt to act."]

46 T'ien hsia yu tao

When the Way rules the world,
Coach horses fertilize fields;
When the Way does not rule,
War horses breed in the parks.

No sin can exceed
Incitement to envy;
No calamity's worse
Than to be discontented;
Nor is there an omen
More dreadful than coveting.
But once be contented,
And truly you'll always be so.

PARAPHRASE

When the Way prevails, nobody wants to go anywhere and the coach horses are turned out to pasture when the Way does not prevail, cavalry horses are bred in the city parks.

The Wise Man, the king, should be contented. With what? The only permanent contentment is that of nature: it is contented to be contented.

47 Pu ch'u hu

The world may be known
Without leaving the house;
The Way may be seen
Apart from the windows.
The further you go,
The less you will know.

Accordingly, the Wise Man
Knows without going,
Sees without seeing,
Does without doing.

PARAPHRASE

The inner world of a man reflects the world around him; the principles of both worlds are the same. Certainty is to be found only in the heart; confusion is bred in the outer world

48 Wei hsüeh jih i

The student learns by daily increment.

The Way is gained by daily loss,

Loss upon loss until

At last comes rest.

By letting go, it all gets done;

The world is won by those who let it go!

But when you try and try,

The world is then beyond the winning.

PARAPHRASE

A student adds each day to his stock of knowledge or experience; but the attainment of the Way is not like that. Each day one sheds a selfish impulse or desire and continues to do so until his will is at rest in the Way and is undistracted.

One can let go of everything except the Way; but having the Way, one has the whole world with it.

The world can be mine if I do not try to own it or run it according to my ideas. When I do try to run it, then I lose it altogether. Let the king be well advised that he can have everything he does not try to possess selfishly.

49 Sheng jen

The Wise Man's mind is free

But tuned to people's need:

"Alike to good and bad

I must be good,

For Virtue is goodness. To honest folk

And those dishonest ones

Alike, I proffer faith,

For Virtue is faithful."

The Wise Man, when abroad,

Impartial to the world,

Does not divide or judge.

But people everywhere

Mark well his ears and eyes;

For wise men hear and see

As little children do.

COMMENT

This poem represents the Wise Man as disinterested, objective in his view of people. He will not be a "judge or divider" over them. He will cause "his sun to rise on the evil and the good" and send "rain on the just and unjust." This poem has caused some commentators to say the mystics are morally indifferent. Quite to the contrary, their virtue is more than social convention; it is a property of the Way and as I have indicated in the Introduction it is moral.

Scholarly critics have tinkered with lines five and nine in verse one above to make them read "and so I obtain goodness," "and so I obtain good faith." With those who prefer these readings I shall not quarrel.

50 Ch'u sheng ju ssu

On leaving life, to enter death:

Thirteen members form a living body;

A corpse has thirteen, too:

Thirteen spots by which a man may pass

From life to death. Why so?

Because his way of life

Is much too gross.

As I have heard, the man who knows

On land how best to be at peace

Will never meet a tiger or a buffalo;

In battle, weapons do not touch his skin.

There is no place the tiger's claws can grip;

Or with his horn, the buffalo can jab;

Or where the soldier can insert his sword.

Why so? In him there is no place of death.

COMMENT

A man has thirteen vital organs through which death may come to him. By ancient lore, there are "the four limbs and the nine external cavities." These spots of danger circumvent his will to live.

The Wise Man, however, is in no danger. His thirteen organs have nothing to do with his life or death. He lives by the Way.

The legend was that Socrates was similarly invulnerable.

51 Tao sheng chih

The Way brings forth,

Its Virtue fosters them,

With matter they take shape,

And circumstance perfects them all:

That is why all things
Do honor to the Way
And venerate its power.

The exaltation of the Way,
The veneration of its power,
Come not by fate or by decree;
But always just because
By nature it is so.

So when the Way brings forth,
Its power fosters all:
They grow, are reared,
And fed and housed until
They come to ripe maturity.
You shall give life to things
But never possess them;
Your work shall depend on none;
You shall be chief but never lord.

This describes the mystic power.

NOTES

This hymn connects the Way with the King or, for that matter, anyone. This I have indicated by the addition of the words, "you shall," in lines 18-21. The last five lines are identical in the Chinese with the last five lines of Poem 10, q.v.

52 T'ien hsia yu shih

It began with a matrix:
The world had a mother
Whose sons can be known
As ever, by her.
But if you know them,
You'll keep close to her
As long as you live
And suffer no harm.

Stop up your senses;
Close up your doors;
Be not exhausted

As long as you live.

Open your senses;

Be busier still:

To the end of your days

There's no help for you.

You are bright, it is said,

If you see what is small;

A store of small strengths

Makes you strong.

By the use of its light,

Make your eyes again bright

From evil to lead you away.

This is called "practicing constancy."

PARAPHRASE

The closer you keep to the "mother," begotten by the Way, that is to say, to the beginning of the world, the safer you will be.

Live within yourself; do not exhaust yourself in the world as it is.

Your perspicacity grows by small increments, so they say, but only by trusting the light of the Way can true intelligence come to you.

53 Shih wo chieh jan

When I am walking on the mighty Way,

Let me but know the very least I may,

And I shall only fear to leave the road.

The mighty Way is easy underfoot,

But people still prefer the little paths.

The royal court is dignified, sedate,

While farmers' fields are overgrown with weeds;

The granaries are empty and yet they

Are clad in rich-embroidered silken gowns.

They have sharp swords suspended at their sides;

With gluttony, they gorge with food and drink.

It is, the people say,

The boastfulness of brigandage,

But surely not the Way!

No matter how ignorant I may be, at least I know better than to get off the Way. It is a smooth Way; and yet people, especially the people around the King, prefer the bypaths of sensuality.

Meanwhile, the people fare badly; robbed by the nobles, they have no strength left to tend their farms.

The people are saying that the King is surrounded by loud bandits.

54 Shan chien che

Set firm in the Way: none shall uproot you;
Cherish it well and none shall estrange you;
Your children's children faithful shall serve
Your forebears at the altar of your house.

Cultivate the Way yourself, and your Virtue will be genuine.

Cultivate it in the home, and its Virtue will overflow.

Cultivate it in the village, and the village will endure.

Cultivate it in the realm, and the realm will flourish.

Cultivate it in the world, and Virtue will be universal.

Accordingly,

One will be judged by the Man of the Way;
Homes will be viewed through the Home of the Way;
And the Village shall measure the village;
And the Realm, for all realms, shall be standard;
And the World, to this world, shall be heaven.

How do I know &e world is like this?

By this.

PARAPHRASE

Everything depends on man's relation to the Way, especially the form of virtue appropriate to each field of interest and endeavor.

This leads to the consideration of the ideal person, home village, realm or world. The actual man is the avenue through which the ideal Man is contemplated. But once a man is set firm in the Way, he becomes the ideal and the standard by which all actual men are judged.

I know this by intuition.

55 Han te chih hou

Rich in virtue, like an infant,
 Noxious insects will not sting him;
 Wild beasts will not attack his flesh
 Nor birds of prey sink claws in him,

His bones are soft, his sinews weak,
 His grip is nonetheless robust,
 Of sexual union unaware,
 His organs all completely formed,
 His vital force is at its height.
 He shouts all day, does not get hoarse:
 His person is a harmony.

Harmony experienced is known as constancy;
 Constancy experienced is called enlightenment,
 Exuberant vitality is ominous, they say;
 A bent for vehemence is called aggressiveness.

That things with age decline in strength,
 You well may say, suits not the Way;
 And not to suit the Way is early death.

PARAPHRASE

The Wise Man is immune to evil. This is due to his childlikeness, which is to say, to the fact that there is complete harmony in his person. No dissipation has wasted his powers.

He shares the constancy of nature and is therefore enlightened. He is not exuberant or aggressive. So may the king be.

If he continues with the Way there will be no decline in his strength or virtue. If he departs from the Way, he is doomed. The last three lines are repeated from Poem 30.

56 Chih che pu yen

Those who know do not talk
 And talkers do not know.

Stop your senses,
 Close the doors;
 Let sharp things be blunted,
 Tangles resolved,
 The light tempered

And turmoil subdued;
For this is mystic unity
In which the Wise Man is moved
Neither by affection
Nor yet by estrangement
Or profit or loss
Or honor or shame.
Accordingly, by all the world,
He is held highest.

NOTE

Lines 3-4 copy Poem 52, lines 9-10; while lines 5-8 copy Poem 4, lines 4-8. The general effect of this passage is somewhat extreme and might suggest that the mystic converts the world he lives in into a kind of Hades. This is not the case as other poems illustrate.

Nevertheless, the king must deny himself and be disinterested. As he demonstrates these features of the Wise Man he will be acknowledged the chief of all the world.

57 I cheng chih kuo

*"Govern the realm by the right,
And battles by stratagem."*

The world is won by refraining.
How do I know this is so?
By this:

As taboos increase, people grow poorer;
When weapons abound, the state grows chaotic;
Where skills multiply, novelties flourish;
As statutes increase, more criminals start.

So the Wise Man will say:

As I refrain, the people will reform;
Since I like quiet, they will keep order;
When I forebear, the people will prosper;
When I want nothing, they will be honest.

The government of the realm must be based on justice and righteousness; trickery is for warfare. The world is to be won by letting it alone; then only will the Way take over. This is indicated by the fact that the more a government acts, the more it has to act. With all our ruling and doing, the world goes badly; it would be better if we were to let it alone altogether. If we did that, the people would be free and, naturally, they would return to the simplicity and honesty of primitive times, to the qualities of the Virginal Block. This is what the king should desire.

58 Ch'i cheng men men

Listlessly govern;
Happy your people;
Govern exactingly;
Restless your people.

"Bad fortune will
Promote the good;
Good fortune, too,
Gives rise to bad."

But who can know to what that leads?
For it is wrong and would assign
To right the strangest derivations
And would mean that goodness
Is produced by magic means!
Has man thus been so long astray?

Accordingly, the Wise Man
Is square but not sharp,
Honest but not malign,
Straight but not severe,
Bright but not dazzling.

COMMENT

The first four lines should be read against the background of Poem 20. "Listless" may refer to Poem 20. Lines 4-8 are quoted merely for refutation.

In Chinese, to be "square" means to be honest, as in English.

That good fortune begets the bad, and vice versa, comes in for severe attack in this poem, on the ground that it would require magic to make it so. Since everything that happens is governed by the Way, magic is to be ruled out at once. Hence the quoted saying is wrong.

59 Chih jen shih T'ien

"For ruling men or serving God,
There's nothing else like stores saved up."

By "stores saved up" is meant forehandedness,
Accumulated Virtue, such that nothing
Can resist it and its limit
None can guess: such infinite resource
Allows the jurisdiction of the king;
Whose Kingdom then will long endure
If it provides the Mother an abode.
Indeed it is the deeply rooted base,
The firm foundation of the Way
To immortality of self and name.

COMMENT

Lines 1-2 are an aphorism quoted to attract attention to the spiritual advice which follows. In line 9, the "Mother" may be a symbol of the Way which accents the female or passive quality of its nature. This is Yinism, as explained in the Introduction, and possibly evidence of the memory of a bygone matriarchy.

60 Chih ta kuo

Rule a large country
As small fish are cooked.

The evil spirits of the world
Lose sanction as divinities
When government proceeds
According to the Way;
But even if they do not lose
Their ghostly countenance and right,
The people take no harm from them;
And if the spirits cannot hurt the folk,
The Wise Man surely does no hurt to them.

Since then the Wise Man and the people
Harm each other not at all,
Their several virtues should converge.

The less you handle small fish when you cook them, the better. According to the Way, the less you do about governing people the better your government will proceed. As the Way comes into its own, the old superstitions lose their hold: the people take the evil spirits less seriously.

When it is conceded that the evil spirits can no longer harm the people, it must appear that at least the Wise Man is harmless. In which case, the king's special virtue and the people's virtue should converge to a common purpose.

61 Ta kuo che

The great land is a place
To which the streams descend,
It is the concourse and
The female of the world:
Quiescent, underneath,
It overcomes the male.

By quietness and by humility
The great land then puts down the small
And gets it for its own;
But small lands too absorb the great
By their subservience.
Thus some lie low, designing conquest's ends;
While others lowly are, by nature bent
To conquer all the rest.

The great land's foremost need is to increase
The number of its folk;
The small land needs above all else to find
Its folk more room to work.
That both be served and each attain its goal
The great land should attempt humility.

PARAPHRASE

A large land has room for many people and so they come to it like rivers to the ocean. It is passive, receptive like a woman who first desires and then overcomes a man. Passivity is here proposed as a principle of international relations.

Beyond passivity, there is humility and this is the ultimate principle of world dominance. Let the king consider this well before he embarks on a war.

The psychology of nations great and small is one; let both be humble and serve each other's need from their respective resources; one has room while the other has people to give. Then there will be peace which always lies at the end of the Way.

62 Tao che wan wu

Like the gods of the shrine in the home,
So the Way and its mystery waits
In the world of material things:
The good man's treasure,
The bad man's refuge.

Fair wordage is ever for sale;
Fair manners are worn like a cloak;
But why should there be such a waste
Of the badness in men?

On the day of the emperor's crowning,
When the three noble dukes are appointed,
Better than chaplets of jade
Drawn by a team of four horses,
Bring the Way as your tribute.

How used the ancients to honor the Way?
Didn't they say that the seeker may find it,
And that sinners who find are forgiven?
So did they lift up the Way and its Virtue
Above everything else in the world.

COMMENT

This is really a poem about the importance of forgiving sinners. It is a waste to punish bad men. Let them be forgiven as befits the Wise Man, the king who does great business on a special day. The Way requires forgiveness of sin and the Way is truly honored when the sinners are forgiven. Incidentally, the king's subjects will at once acknowledge that this is the Way.

63 Wei wu wei

Act in repose;
Be at rest when you work;
Relish unflavored things.
Great or small,
Frequent or rare,

Requite anger with virtue.

Take hard jobs in hand
While they are easy;
And great affairs too
While they are small.
The troubles of the world
Cannot be solved except
Before they grow too hard.
The business of the world
Cannot be done except
While relatively small.
The Wise Man, then, throughout his life
Does nothing great and yet achieves
A greatness of his own.

Again, a promise lightly made
Inspires little confidence;
Or often trivial, sure that man
Will often come to grief.
Choosing hardship, then, the Wise Man
Never meets with hardship all his life.

PARAPHRASE

The paradox of "acting without doing anything," or of simultaneous work and rest, or of relishing the flavorless, is resolved by the miracle of the Way.

The Wise Man is always serious because he knows how small troubles grow great and he deals with them while they are easy to handle. The King achieves greatness by choosing hard things before they choose him.

64 Ch'i an i ch'ih

A thing that is still is easy to hold.
Given no omen, it is easy to plan.
Soft things are easy to melt.
Small particles scatter easily.
The time to take care is before it is done.
Establish order before confusion sets in.
Tree trunks around which you can reach with your arms were at first only minuscule sprouts.
A nine-storied terrace began with a clod.
A thousand-mile journey began with a foot put down.

Doing spoils it, grabbing misses it;
 So the Wise Man refrains from doing and doesn't spoil anything;
 He grabs at nothing and so never misses.

People are constantly spoiling a project when it lacks only a step to completion.
 To avoid making a mess of it, be as careful of the end as you were of the beginning.

So the Wise Man wants the unwanted; he sets no
 high value on anything because it is hard
 to get. He studies what others neglect
 and restores to the world what multitudes
 have passed by. His object is to restore
 everything to its natural course, but he
 dares take no steps to that end.

PARAPHRASE

The King should be firmly grounded in aphorisms. Here are some of them: they are bits selected from the popular store of wisdom most agreeable to the mystics.

65 Ku chih shan wei

Those ancients who were skilled in the Way
 Did not enlighten people by their rule
 But had them ever held in ignorance:
 The more the folk know what is going on
 The harder it becomes to govern them.

For public knowledge of the government
 Is such a thief that it will spoil the realm;
 But when good fortune brings good times to all
 The land is ruled without publicity.
 To know the difference between these two
 Involves a standard to be sought and found.

To know that standard always, everywhere,
 Is mystic Virtue, justly known as such;
 Which Virtue is so deep and reaching far,
 It causes a return, things going back
 To that prime concord which at first all shared.

Since (Poem 1) "there are ways but the Way is uncharted; there are names but not nature in words," the skilled governors of ancient times would never pretend to say what really was going on in the government of the realm. Any statement would only confuse the people and make governing them more difficult. A "ministry of public enlightenment" would be like a plunderer and spoil everything. When good times are had, it is because the Way has taken its own free course. The secret of the Way is not for interested parties or those who are bound by desire.

The Way is its own standard and producer of good government on earth. It is the mystic's virtue to know it and to use it. When it is found and applied, all things will return to that primitive harmony which was once disturbed, and being disturbed, gave rise to mankind's ineluctable problems

66 Chiang hai

How could the rivers and the seas
Become like kings to valleys?
Because of skill in lowliness
They have become the valley's lords.

So then to be above the folk,
You speak as if you were beneath;
And if you wish to be out front,
Then act as if you were behind.

The Wise Man so is up above
But is no burden to the folk;
His station is ahead of them
To see they do not come to harm.

The world will gladly help along
The Wise Man and will bear no grudge.
Since he contends not for his own
The world will not contend with him.

PARAPHRASE

The king can attain his true character as a king only by humility and disinterestedness, both of which virtues must be real and apparent.

67 T'ien hsia chieh wei

Everywhere, they say the Way, our doctrine,
 Is so very like detested folly;
 But greatness of its own alone explains
 Why it should be thus held beyond the pale.
 If it were only orthodox, long since
 It would have seemed a small and petty thing!

I have to keep three treasures well secured:
 The first, compassion; next, frugality;
 And third, I say that never would I once
 Presume that I should be the whole world's chief.

Given compassion, I can take courage;
 Given frugality, I can abound;
 If I can be the world's most humble man,
 Then I can be its highest instrument.

Bravery today knows no compassion;
 Abundance is, without frugality,
 And eminence without humility:
 This is the death indeed of all our hope.

In battle, 'tis compassion wins the day;
 Defending, 'tis compassion that is firm:
 Compassion arms the people God would save!

PARAPHRASE

The doctrine of the Way has been generally attacked, presumably by orthodox Confucianists, as heterodox, "detestable folly." It has not been understood by people satisfied with a petty orthodoxy. Presumably the king will understand so great a doctrine where others have failed. The failure to understand it is moral rather than intellectual. Compassion, frugality and humility: these three great virtues are absent from political life. Their absence can be fatal to the nation. It is, however, chiefly compassion that connects the people to the will of God.

68 Shan wei shih che

A skillful soldier is not violent;
 An able fighter does not rage;
 A mighty conqueror does not give battle;
 A great commander is a humble man.

You may call this pacific virtue;
 Or say that it is mastery of men;
 Or that it is rising to the measure of God,
 Or to the stature of the ancients.

PARAPHRASE

The man of the Way is no doctrinaire pacifist; he may be a soldier, a fighter, a conqueror, or one who commands and is obeyed. He is not, however, a man of violence; the imponderables are the essence of his art. Let the king take note.

This view leads to peace, and as the king is able to keep peace with honor, he rises to God's measure or compares favorably with the worthies of ancient times who followed the Way.

69 Yung ping yu yen

The strategists have a saying:

"If I cannot be host,
 Then let me be guest.
 But if I dare not advance
 Even an inch,
 Then let me retire a foot."

This is what they call

A campaign without a march,
 Sleeves up but no bare arms,
 Shooting but no enemies,
 Or arming without weapons.

Than helpless enemies, nothing is worse:

To them I lose my treasures.

When opposing enemies meet,

The compassionate man is the winner!

PARAPHRASE

The strategists are absurd. Little bankrupt feudal states, like sleeves with no arms in them, marching and going nowhere, arming without weapons, plotting moves and counter-moves as the empire sinks into chaos, each hoping to conquer the rest: this is the picture the king must contemplate.

Actually, he must have realized that nothing could be worse for him than that all the little states around his should be helpless before his attack. He would then succumb to temptation and his three treasures (see Poem 67) would be lost. It is the one who loses the war that really wins it!

The first saying quoted above means: if I cannot take care of an enemy on my own ground, let me invade his.

70 Wu yen shen i chih

My words are easy just to understand:
To live by them is very easy too;
Yet it appears that none in all the world
Can understand or make them come to life.

My words have ancestors, my works a prince;
Since none know this, unknown I too remain.
But honor comes to me when least I'm known:
The Wise Man, with a jewel in his breast,
Goes clad in garments made of shoddy stuff.

PARAPHRASE

"My yoke is easy and my burden light"; yet it is very hard for people to take it up.
Words, precepts and doctrines, like people, must have pedigrees and high authority to gain respect and fame. Mine have precedents and principle but this does not get them recognition and so I too am ignored. In this respect, at least, I share the honors of all those prophets who have borne priceless truth in their hearts but have looked like beggars all their lives. It would be better for all concerned if the king had a jewel in his breast. The shoddy clothes could be optional.

71 Chih pu chih shang

To know that you are ignorant is best;
To know what you do not, is a disease;
But if you recognize the malady
Of mind for what it is, then that is health.

The Wise Man has indeed a healthy mind;
He sees an aberration as it is
And for that reason never will be ill.

PARAPHRASE

Socrates in Greece, perhaps a century before the writer of this poem, developed his observation as irony and moral duty: here it is seen that the knowledge of one's real ignorance is indispensable to mental health. No one is in danger, says the writer, so long as he can be critical of his own mental states. The king should develop this power.

72 Min pu wei wei

If people do not dread your majesty,
 A greater dread will yet descend on them
 See then you do not cramp their dwelling place
 Or immolate their children or their stock,
 Nor anger them by your own angry ways.

It is the Wise Man's way to know himself,
 And never to reveal his inward thoughts;
 He loves himself but so, is not set up;
 He chooses this in preference to that.

PARAPHRASE

When people no longer stand in awe of their king, divine wrath, much more dreadful, will overtake them. So the king will do well not to imprison them or oppress them in their homes. He should not take revenge by killing their children or confiscating their livestock. He must not make them resentful by his resentment of them.

According to Poem 71, the king should know his own attitudes and impulses for what they are, but he should never show them to the people. Let him respect himself but not be conceited. Then he can be discriminating in the proper sense of the word, choosing benevolence and rejecting compulsive force.

73 Yung yü kan

A brave man who dares to, will kill;
 A brave man who dares not, spares life;
 And from them both come good and ill.
 "God hates some folks, but who knows why?"
 The Wise Man hesitates there too:
 God's Way is bound to conquer all
 But not by strife does it proceed.

Not by words does God get answers:
 He calls them not and all things come.
 Master plans unfold but slowly,
 Like God's wide net enclosing all:
 Its mesh is coarse but none are lost.

PARAPHRASE

It also takes brave men to dare not to kill others, when the king wants killing done. Perhaps the king is as well served by one as the other. Who knows what part God plays in war or punishment? The

king must hesitate before he puts himself in place of God. All one knows is that God's will is done and that his will is not strife.

God gets what he wants in his own way, the Way; he does not issue words, but his master plan is to be seen unfolding like a great net which encloses all and from which not one escapes.

74 Min pu wei ssu

The people do not fear at all to die;
What's gained therefore by threat'ning them with death?
If you could always make them fear decease,
As if it were a strange event and rare,
Who then would dare to take and slaughter them?
The executioner is always set
To slay, but those who substitute for him
Are like the would-be master carpenters
Who try to chop as that skilled craftsman does
And neatly always mangle their own hands!

PARAPHRASE

Capital punishment is no deterrent to crime because death is commonplace and people do not fear it. If, however, the king goes in for mass executions to the extent that they become remarkable, he will need many soldiers, who are, in effect, executioners. Who would dare to be candidates for this job when it might lead to their own execution, as frequently, in such cases, it does?

75 Min chih chi

The people starve because of those
Above them, who consume by tax
In grain and kind more than their right.
For this, the people are in want.

The people are so hard to rule
Because of those who are above them,
Whose interference makes distress.
For this, they are so hard to rule.

The people do not fear to die;
They too demand to live secure:
For this, they do not fear to die.
So they, without the means to live,
In virtue rise above those men
Who value life above its worth

In the last century but one before the end of the Chou dynasty, the ruling classes of China are demoralized. They feel frightened at the prospect of growing disorder. They attempt to secure themselves at the expense of the people.

The people, who are familiar with death, are not intimidated by it. Their will to live is greater than their fear of death. In this, they are superior to the nobility whose fear of death is greater than their will to live.

76 Jen chih sheng yeh

Alive, a man is supple, soft;
In death, unbending, rigorous.
All creatures, grass and trees, alive
Are plastic but are pliant too,
And dead, are friable and dry.

Unbending rigor is the mate of death,
And yielding softness, company of life:
Unbending soldiers get no victories;
The stiffest tree is readiest for the axe.
The strong and mighty topple from their place;
The soft and yielding rise above them all.

PARAPHRASE

Contrary to tradition, the female principle, as softness and pliability, is to be associated with life and survival. Because he can yield, a man can survive. In contrast, the male principle, which is here assumed to be rigorous and hard, makes a man break under pressure. At any rate, the last two lines make a fair and oft-told description of revolution as many generations of people have seen it.

77 T'ien chih tao

Is not God's Way much like a bow well bent?
The upper part has been disturbed, pressed down;
The lower part is raised up from its place;
The slack is taken up; the slender width
Is broader drawn; for thus the Way of God
Cuts people down when they have had too much,
And fills the bowls of those who are in want.
But not the way of man will work like this:
The people who have not enough are spoiled
For tribute to the rich and surfeited.

Who can benefit the world
From stored abundance of his own?
He alone who has the Way,
The Wise Man who can act apart
And not depend on others' whims,
But not because of his high rank
Will he succeed; he does not wish
To flaunt superiority.

PARAPHRASE

God's Way is to "put down the mighty from their seats" and to exalt "them of low degree." "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away." But this is not the way of men, who rob the poor for the rich.

So there is nothing to be hoped for from the rich; only the Wise Man, the king, who is on the Way and has its virtue, can hope to put justice to work in society. Only he is independent enough to succeed in the effort and only he has sufficient humility to try.

78 T'ien hsia jou je

Nothing is weaker than water,
But when it attacks something hard
Or resistant, then nothing withstands it,
And nothing will alter its way.

Everyone knows this, that weakness prevails
Over strength and that gentleness conquers
The adamant hindrance of men, but that
Nobody demonstrates how it is so.

Because of this the Wise Man says
That only one who bears the nation's shame
Is fit to be its hallowed lord;
That only one who takes upon himself
The evils of the world may be its king.

This is paradox.

PARAPHRASE

The analogy of the irresistible power of water is stated again, as in Poem 43. The paradox of weakness overcoming strength is well known in theory but no one seems to be able to make it work

This leads to a thought of the king. He must be able to make it work if he is fit for his high office, as "lord of the altars of the soil and the grain." Only as the king is able to take upon himself the sins of the world can he be king. This is the paradox of the power of nonresistance, the accomplishment of those who, of themselves, do nothing but who allow the Way to use them.

79 Ho ta yüan

How can you think it is good
To settle a grievance too great
To ignore, when the settlement
Surely evokes other piques?

The Wise Man therefore will select
The left-hand part of contract tallies:
He will not put the debt on other men.
This virtuous man promotes agreement;
The vicious man allots the blame.

"Impartial though the Way of God may be,
It always favors good men."

PARAPHRASE

To settle a major cause of discontent so that other grievances are bound to ensue is poor administration.

Contracts are made by lines cut on bamboo tally slips which are then split in two. The debtor, being considered the inferior, gets the left-hand portion. To show his humility, the Wise Man deliberately chooses the inferior section, assumes the guilt or the debt, and thus disarms the adversary. This is the way of the man of virtue. The vicious man, by contrast, tries to fix the blame or debt on others. God's Way is no respecter of persons but when a man is good, the Way is on his side.

80 Hsiao kuo kua min

The ideal land is small
Its people very few,
Where tools abound
Ten times or yet
A hundred-fold
Beyond their use;
Where people die
And die again
But never emigrate;
Have boats and carts

Which no one rides.
 Weapons have they
 And armor too,
 But none displayed.
 The folk returns
 To use again
 The knotted cords.
 Their meat is sweet;
 Their clothes adorned,
 Their homes at peace,
 Their customs charm.

And neighbor lands
 Are juxtaposed
 So each may hear
 The barking dogs,
 The crowing cocks
 Across the way;
 Where folks grow old
 And folks will die
 And never once
 Exchange a call.

COMMENT

This describes the ideal commonwealth, the land of no-place (Utopia), quite in contrast to the almost contemporary *Republic* of Plato.

The knotted cords, a means of memorandum, preceded the invention of writing in China, as in other lands. The Chinese abacus is descended from knotted cords but has sliding knots.

81 Hsin yen pu mei

As honest words may not sound fine,
 Fine words may not be honest ones;
 A good man does not argue, and
 An arguer may not be good!
 The knowers are not learned men
 And learned men may never know.

The Wise Man does not hoard his things;
 Hard-pressed, from serving other men,
 He has enough and some to spare;

But having given all he had,
He then is very rich indeed.

God's Way is gain that works no harm;
The Wise Man's way, to do his work
Without contending for a crown.

COMMENT

In the last stanza, the king is advised to work according to God's Way, without considering his crown, i.e., let him not consider the demands of politicians and sycophants but hew to the line that meets the specifications of the Way.