

WAY OF VIRTUE CLASSIC

道德經

Dào Dé Jīng

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1 *Natural Gateway* 常門

The way that may be went is not the natural way.
The name that may be named is not the natural name.

Nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
Naming is the mother of the ten-thousand things.

Having no desire follows naturally from witnessing wonder.
Having desire follows naturally from witnessing limitation.

These both occur together with different names.
Together they make a mystery.

Mystery leads to further mystery.
Wonder crowds the gateway.

2 Non-Doing 無為

Everyone in the world who knows beauty strives for beauty
and that's where the ugly comes from.
Everyone who knows good strives for good
and that's where the no-good comes from.

Likewise, having and not-having only exist because of each other.
Difficult and easy are defined relative to each other.
Long and short are formed relative to each other.
High and low are aligned relative to each other.
Sound and music are differentiated relative to each other.
Front and back correspond relative to each other.

This is why the Sages stick to non-doing in their work.
They teach by walking and not talking.
All things come about like this: without discussion.

Living without possessing.
Acting without presuming.

Finishing the job without dwelling on it.
They alone do not dwell.
Thus they alone do not depart.

3 *Letting the People* 使民

Not praising the worthy lets the people free from quarrel.
Not valuing the rare and expensive lets the people free from theft.
Not focusing on desires lets people's hearts free from chaos.

This is how the Sages take care of things:
emptying the heart and filling the belly,
softening the will and strengthening the bones.

What is natural lets people be without knowledge, without desire.
It enables those who are wise to boldly not-do.
Doing without doing and nothing is undone.

4 Before God 帝之先

The way gushes out yet its potential is still somehow unfulfilled.
From such depths! As if the ten-thousand things have an ancestor.

Softening what is sharp and releasing what is stuck.
Harmonizing the light and unifying the dust.

So dark and clear! Almost as if alive.
I have no idea whose child it is.
It came before even the idea of god.

5 Holding Center 守中

The world is inhumane.
It treats the 10,000 things like straw dogs.
The Sages are inhumane.
They treat the 100 clans like straw dogs.

There is a space in the middle of the world
like a bellows or a flute.
It's emptiness is incorruptible.
The more that goes in
the more that comes out.

The many words and numbers are exhausting.
Nothing's as good as holding on to center.

6 *Mysterious Feminine* 玄牝

The spirit of the valley does not die.
It's called the "mysterious feminine."

The gateway to the mysterious feminine
is called the "root of heaven and earth."

Soft and continuous, as if alive.
Its use requires no strain.

7 Not Living for Oneself 不自生

The sky is long in space and the earth is long in time.
The universe is thus long in both space and time.
However it is only because it does not live for itself
that it is able to live for so long.

Therefore it is because the Sages put their bodies behind them
that their bodies end up right in front of them.
It is because they transcend beyond their bodies
that they end up in the middle of their bodies.

Is it not because they have no secrets
that they are then afforded such complete secrecy?

8 The Goodness of Water 善水

The highest good is like water.
Water's good brings favor to everything and yields no contention.
It flows through even the nastiest of humanity's places.
In this sense it is almost pure way.

When a home is good it's grounded.
When a mind is good it's vast.
When helping is good it's kind.
When speaking is good it's sincere.
When fixing is good it's effective.
When doing is good it's capable.
When moving is good it's timely.

Therefore it is only when one is without contention
that one can be without fault.

9 *The Way of the Sky* 天之道

Trying to contain it when it's overflowing
is not as good as letting it finish.

Using it when it's still sharp
can only last so long.

When gold and jade fill the halls
there aren't many who can keep it.

Affluent, distinguished and proud of it:
one loses one's sense of culpability.

Skill that comes as the body retreats
is the way of the sky.

10 Mysterious Virtue 玄德

As you nourish the soul and embrace the one, can you do it without leaving?
As you harness the breath and engender softness, can you do it like a baby?

As you cleanse and purify your vision of the mystery, can you do it without delusion?
As you love the people and govern the kingdom, can you do it without contrivance?

As you open and close the gate of the sky, how can you do it without the feminine?
As you clarify and illuminate the four directions, can you do it without knowing?

Born of it and raised by it.
Living without possessing.
Acting without presuming.
Lasting without controlling.

This is what is called “mysterious virtue.”

11 *Making Useful* 為用

Thirty spokes link together into one hub.
When it's empty, having a carriage is useful.

Clay is molded to make a vessel.
When it's empty, having a vessel is useful.

Doors and windows are cut out to make a room.
When it's empty, having a room is useful.

Therefore, being something is how to make favor
and being nothing is how to make useful.

12 *Choosing This* 取此

The five hues cause one's eyes to go blind.
The five tones cause one's ears to go deaf.
The five flavors cause one's tongue to fade.
Running around chasing and seeking causes one's mind to go crazy.
Chasing what is hard to get makes it hard to move.

This is why the Sages serve the gut and not the eyes,
thereby leaving that and choosing this.

13 Caring for the World 託天下

Praise and disgrace both sound the same alarm.
Mortal life is just as troublesome as it is precious.

What do I mean by saying: “Praise and disgrace both sound the same alarm?”
Whether winning it or losing it, as long as praise is involved it’s the same alarm.

What do I mean by saying: “Mortal life is just as troublesome as it is precious?”
I only have trouble because I have a mortal life.
Without this mortal life then where would the trouble come from?

Therefore, valuing the preciousness of mortal life in the world
is the same as attaching and committing oneself to the world.
Loving and cherishing mortal life in the world
is the same as entrusting oneself with the care of the world.

14 Story of the Way 道紀

Looking at it leads to not seeing it.

We call it “elsewhere.”

Listening to it leads to not hearing it.

We call it “ethereal.”

Handling it leads to not grasping it.

We call it “abstruse.”

These three words cannot be summoned for questioning.

They quickly blur together into one.

Up above it's not illuminated and down below it's not obscured.

There are guidelines upon guidelines,

but it cannot be named!

It repeatedly turns back into nothing at all.

You could call it “the form of the formless” or “the image of nothingness.”

You could call it “incoherent” and “enigmatic.”

Facing it leads to not seeing its front.

Following it leads to not seeing its back.

Keeping a hold of the way of the old,

as a matter of course, drives the new into being.

The ability to know the old is therefore the beginning.

You could call it “the story of the way.”

15 Warriors of Old 古士

The best warriors of old
were wonderfully subtle and mysteriously connected.
Their depth could not be fathomed.
For those whose depth cannot be fathomed
any description is necessarily forced.

Alert as if crossing a river in winter.
Wary as if suspicious of all neighbors.
Respectful as if always a guest.

Diffuse like melting ice.
Sincere like a piece of plain wood.
Vast like a wide valley.
Obscure like muddy water.

What is muddy by means of stillness gradually comes clear.
What is calm by means of long movement gradually comes alive.

Keeping to the way means not desiring to be fulfilled.
Only those who remain unfulfilled are able to stay hidden.
They never even begin to finish.

16 *Watching for the Return* 觀復

When you make emptiness absolute and take stillness seriously
the 10,000 things all spontaneously start working together.

That's why I watch for the return.

All things vary in their style and expression,
yet each returns to its root the same.

Returning to the root is called tranquility.
It is also known as returning to life.

Returning to life is what is called “natural.”
Knowing what is natural means speaking clearly.

Not knowing what is natural means
making presumptions and breeding misfortunes.

Knowing what is natural is a kind of forbearance.
Forbearance leads to equity and balance.

Equity and balance leads to wholeness.
Wholeness leads to the sky.

The sky leads to the way.
The way leads to the ongoing passage of time.
The loss of mortal life bears no threat.

17 The Most High 太上

As to the most high, those below simply know and have.
At the next level down, they love and praise.
At the next level down, they fear and respect.
At the next level down, they defy and disgrace.

Distrust comes from a lack of trust.
When considered deeply, words have a greater value.
When the skillful effect is achieved and the work is done
each of the hundred clans will say: “we did it all by ourselves.”

18 Greatness of the Way 大道

When the greatness of the Way is abandoned
there is born humanity and justice.

When wisdom and reason emerge
they bring the “grand delusion” right along with them.

When the six relations can no longer agree
there is born filial piety and kindness.

When nations and families sink into chaos
there is born the loyalty of the subject.

19 Making Civilization 為文

Let go of sacredness and give up on wisdom
and the people will benefit a hundred times over.

Let go of benevolence and give up on justice
and the people will return to familial love.

Let go of cleverness and give up on profit
and thieves and robbers will cease to be.

However these three things alone are still not enough to make a civilization whole.
One must also let the people have that which belongs to them.

Express what is plain and embrace what is simple.

Have less secrets and fewer desires.

Let go of learning and be without trouble.

20 Nourishing the Mother 食母

Affirmation goes together with negation.
How could they possibly be separate?

The good goes together with the bad.
Why do we think they are separate?

Once somebody discovers what to fear,
it is impossible for them not to fear it.

It's a barren and uncultivated
wasteland in all directions!

And yet everyone is radiant and beaming,
as if they were enjoying a great feast,
or climbing a tower in spring.

I alone am apprehensive and blank,
like a newborn not yet even a baby:
nowhere to go, nowhere to return to.

Everyone has more than enough.
Only I appear to lack.
I have the mind of a fool,
all mixed up and confused.

Ordinary people are bright and cheery.
Only I am dim and obscure.

Ordinary people look out and take notice.
Only I am indifferent and unmoved.

Placid and serene as a calm sea,
Constant as wind in the mountains:
never ceasing, never stopping.

Everyone has a purpose and a use.
Only I hold out and refuse.

I alone am different from others
in the high value I place
on nourishing the mother.