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Preface to the Vernacular Explanation of the Dao De Jing

I am fortunate to have been born in an age of world progress and the invention of the mechanical sciences.

Over water there are transport ships; on land, trains; in the sky, airplanes; under the sea, submarines.

It is as if the five continents are one family, the nations of the world one household.

Moreover, in everything we use, see, and hear, all machines are convenient and exquisitely made.

There are many happy encounters and much joy.

Remembering the source while drinking the water, I cannot help but admire and thank the pioneers of mechanical science.

Although the pioneers of mechanical science had the noble intention of benefiting the nation and the people, with no thought of harming others,

unexpectedly there arose cruel and inhumane people who stole the fruits of these sciences to create poison bells and cannons, slaughtering our fellow human beings.

All the great mechanical scientists, though endowed with skillful hands and keen minds, were not only powerless to stop them, but were even exploited to help produce such weapons.

These fine machines not only failed to resist the guns and cannons but also served to transport troops and supplies, and to transmit messages.

Thus, happiness turned into calamity, progress became poison; progress at its extreme would send one’s own people into the hail of bullets and rain of shells.

Ha! Can this “happiness” still be enjoyed? Can this “progress” still advance?

I believe that if the souls of the pioneers of material civilization are aware, they would not only loathe those who make weapons, but also regret it themselves.

The sages, in educating the world, always first teach the knowledge of morality, and only then the knowledge of skill.

With moral heart, skills can assist morality, and morality, borrowing from skills, can shine all the more.

If the heart is full of deceit and cunning, skills will aid evil; morality will decay, and the world will fall into disorder.

If one does not teach morality first, but teaches skills first, then those with skill but without morality will inevitably fall into corruption, do all manner of wrongs, and grow arrogant in their abilities.

This is the great underlying cause of the world’s turmoil in the past few centuries.

I have long carried this pain in my heart, but due to the trends of the age I dared not speak of it in detail, fearing it would be useless to say and would only bring ridicule upon myself.

In August of this year, the weather was peaceful, and I had just finished annotating the *Dao De Jing* .

I went up Mount Tai to mark its completion.

From the summit, I looked in all directions and saw oppressive clouds shrouding the sky and sun;

I heard cries of grief and wailing that shook the earth and startled the heavens.

My heart ached and my eyes grew moist.

Unable to keep silent, I borrowed pen and ink from a Daoist, and with each word like a tear, I freely wrote down my thoughts to sincerely inform my fellow countrymen.

Even if some say I am mad, I do not care.

It is like the tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants among beasts — fierce in courage, a hundred times more dangerous than robbers —

yet the harm they cause is a million times less than that of robbers armed with skill and weapons.

If someone were to teach them skills and give them guns, they would surely devour all humankind and still not be satisfied.

Thus, those with morality pass on skills selectively, not carelessly, just as Bodhidharma's martial arts and the Daoist sword techniques were taught —

not out of stinginess, nor unwillingness for others to have skills, but to prevent future harm, and so caution was necessary.

The *Great Learning* says: "All things have a root and branches; all affairs have a beginning and an end. Knowing what comes first and what comes after brings one close to the Dao."

Morality is the root; material things are the branches.

Morality should come first; material things after.

Otherwise, though our country was among the earliest to be civilized, producing sages in succession — such as the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen, King Wu, Duke of Zhou, Confucius, and Mencius — all were people of unfathomable divine transformation.

Some invented agricultural tools, musical instruments, and water control devices; some created the armillary sphere; some invented the compass; some were famed for their fine materials; some for their great learning.

They were the forerunners of all the world's inventions, too many to list.

Was it that they could not make trains, ships, and all kinds of machines?

No — they simply first taught morality, not the practicalities of sound, light, electricity, and chemistry, until the people's morality was established, and then taught skills.

In governing the world, this was the necessary method of our sages.

The West did not understand this and laughed at our teachings as old-fashioned.

Our teachings may indeed seem old-fashioned, yet the world today is in utter chaos.

I dare ask the great mechanical scientists to create a machine that can save us.

Even so, this calamity of war is not the fault of the materialists;

if morality and material progress had advanced together in earlier days, how could today's strange disasters have come about?

However, it is understandable that the West laughs at us.

What is truly astonishing is that we, the descendants of the divinely wise Yellow Emperor and the upright disciples of Confucius and Mencius,

have picked up the scraps of the Western doctrines of killing, stolen the outer shell of their killing machines, and have erased in one stroke the great laws of governance handed down from our two emperors, three kings, Confucius, Zeng, Si, and Meng,

regarding them as deadly poison. How deluded to this extreme!

They do not know that our Daoist learning can not only save our nation from poverty and weakness, but can also save the West from calamity.

This is no empty boast — only by creating a marvelous and unfathomable "Dao Device" can we counter the deadly weapons of war.

After writing *On Ceasing War*, I wished to create such a device.

I pondered it diligently for three years, fearing no lack of materials.

This spring, Mr. Yang Xianting lectured on the Supreme Dao, saying the energy of the Dao had already stirred, and it was time to study the *Dao De Jing*.

Around the same time, Mr. Liu Liqing sent me his work *Good Words*, which embodies the meaning of sharing goodness with others and being selfless.

Inspired by this, I also took up the *Dao De Jing* to read.

When I came to the lines "The great carving does not cut" and "The nameless uncarved block," I suddenly realized — the method and the materials are all here!

Because of the importance of the matter, I followed the Islamic way of purification, fasting, and bathing to cleanse body and mind;

I prayed in the Christian manner to God;

I drew from the *Analects* the principle of Confucius' "carpenter's square" at seventy, and from Ziyou in Wucheng using the butcher's knife;

I drew from the Buddhist sutras the wisdom of wondrous observation.

Then, using Buddhist insight to observe the state of the world, I saw that the heavenly cycle was at noon, the earth's energy had opened;

using Confucius' square and the principles of wisdom, I made the device.

People did not recognize it, but in the end it was fit for use.

Measuring Laozi's nameless uncarved block, I found it whole, though previous generations had divided it chemically into two great parts and eighty-one sections,

allowing over a hundred craftsmen to make whatever they wished — great artisans made great devices, small workers made small devices — suitable or unsuitable, all were out of place.

Fortunately, this block is a divine block.

Though carved by craftsmen, it can never be exhausted, and it can return to its original substance, whole and complete.

I was both amazed and delighted, and dared not act rashly.

I stilled my wandering thoughts, focused my energy, my body like dead wood, my heart like cold ashes,

feeling the harmony of Heaven had arrived and the spirit had come to dwell.

I met it with spirit, not with the eyes.

Taking the butcher's knife, I cut freely, more wondrously than Butcher Ding cutting up an ox for Lord Wen Hui.

When done, it was still whole — a device of the gentleman who is not a device.

Looking closely, it was formless yet had form, divided into two great parts and eighty-one sections.

When cutting, I opened great clefts and guided great hollows;

due to the nature of the original, the number was the same as before, but the form and use differed entirely.

Though less refined than before, it suited today’s needs.

The front half resembled Laozi’s flying, transforming blue ox; the back half resembled the same-track carriage described by Confucius in the central hall.

The front half was for travel, with tremendous ox-power, able to reach all places under the sun and moon, where frost and dew fall, where boats and carts go, where human strength reaches — anywhere with living beings.

The back half was for carrying cargo, with a spacious interior, able to carry all the classics of the sages — the *Poetry*, *History*, *Changes*, *Rites*, *Spring and Autumn*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, *Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Mencius* —

plus the various masters and the *Twenty-Four Histories* for reference.

Due to current circumstances, I cast aside the dross of petty comfort and wrote out the essence of Great Harmony.

Wherever this ox-cart went, it emitted auspicious light and harmonious energy, forming benevolence, righteousness, and morality; naturally the country would be secure and the people at peace.

It was truly a treasure, praised by all who saw it.

Only one ignorant friend said: “Your Dao Device is good, but why not have someone sit in it and give speeches?”

I replied: “In the first illustration, do you not see that there is no one?”

Yet, after it was made, I worried — how could one ox and one cart travel the whole world?

By fortune, Mr. Ye Xiting came to visit, saw it with great joy, raised funds, and had a thousand identical ones made in Shanghai.

But I have never attended a technical school, never studied mechanics, know nothing of physics, and do not understand manufacturing.

Whether my creation is suitable or not, I humbly offer it to all nations, hoping great mechanical scientists will give guidance.

There is one more important matter to state in advance: if it is not suitable, there is nothing more to say;

if it is useful, then when the world is at peace, I must take it back.

For Laozi’s nameless uncarved block has long been said to be “The great carving does not cut.”

I could not bear the world’s chaos, so I took it to forcibly create a Dao Device to save the world.

Once used, it must be returned to its original substance, the nameless block given back to Laozi.

I dare not keep what I have borrowed; my pledge will be clear for all to see.

Fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, summer of the 8th year of the Republic (1919)

Jiang Xizhang of Licheng, Shandong

Revision #2
Created 2025-08-10 02:41:34 UTC by Phil
Updated 2025-08-10 02:49:49 UTC by Phil