

Chapter 3

Original Text

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Translation

Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not compete.

Do not value hard-to-get goods, and the people will not become thieves.

Do not put what can be desired on display, and the people's hearts will not be thrown into disorder.

Therefore, in the Sage's governance, he empties their hearts, fills their bellies, softens their will, and strengthens their bones.

He constantly makes the people without cunning and without cravings, so that even the clever do not dare to act (deviously).

By acting through nonaction, nothing is left ungoverned.

Word Notes

- □ — “**worthy/able**”: persons of talent and ability.
- □ — “**to compete**”: to contend, to vie for gain or fame.

- 寶物 — “**hard-to-get goods**”: precious goods/valuables people prize.
- 盜 — “**thief / to steal**”: stealing, robbery.
- 所欲 — “**what can be desired**”: objects of appetite that stir cravings.
- 空 — “**empty**”: to make empty; to clear out (extravagance).
- 實 — “**fill**”: to make full; to return to plain sufficiency.
- 柔 — “**soften/weaken**”: to make gentle, to quell contentious ardor.
- 強 — “**strengthen**”: to make firm/stout.
- 骨 — “**bones**”: backbone; one’s physical sturdiness and upright bearing.
- 無術 — “without cunning” (not crafty/scheming).
- 無欲 — “without cravings” (free from appetitive urges).
- 無為 — “**act through nonaction**”: handle affairs without force or clinging.

Chapter Explanation

Not exalting people of ability prevents the populace from competing for reputation. Not making much of hard-to-get goods keeps the people from stealing money and property. Not parading the things one hankers after keeps people’s hearts from becoming a muddle.

Therefore the Sage, in governing the world, empties their hearts so as to take away extravagance, fills their bellies so as to bring them back to plainness, softens their will so as to halt contention, and strengthens their bones so they can stand on their own. He constantly brings it about that people have no crooked cleverness and no appetitive craving; he causes even the quick-witted not to dare engage in fraudulent actions. Simply by calmly carrying out affairs of nonaction, there is then nothing under Heaven that does not become well ordered.

Discourse

The order in which the Great Dao brings things forth is this: **the One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three**. “One” is the Heavenly Dao; “Two” is the Dao of **yin and yang** in mutual opposition; “Three” is the **human Dao**, formed by the union of One and Two—the central pivot of Dao. Hence Chapter 1 expounds Heaven’s Dao; Chapter 2 expounds the Dao of opposition and cyclical reciprocity; this chapter expounds the **human Dao of inner sagehood and outer kingship**. The “outer king” must be rooted in the “inner sage”: only with Heavenly virtue can there be royal way; only those who can govern **themselves** can govern **the world**. In ancient times, Emperor Yao harmonized the myriad states entirely by **clearly perfecting august virtue**; Emperor Shun, “Chonghua,” co-ruled by **reverently rectifying himself and facing south**. Therefore, when the Sage governs the world, he takes **self-cultivation** as the root. If he can cultivate himself so that the **heart is empty**, the **belly full**, the **will softened**, and the **bones strengthened**, then the world is governed by **nonaction**.

If the heart is not empty, private desires multiply. If the belly is not full, hunger abounds—Mencius says, “If there is no *this*, there is starvation”; *starvation* here means **not full**. If the will is not softened, people become rash and impetuous. If the bones are not strong, they grow weak and

timid. An **empty heart** encompasses the Great Void, with nothing outside it. A **full belly** means a capacity that embraces Heaven and Earth and contains all things (here “belly” means **receptivity**, not stuffing oneself with meat and wine). A **softened will** means yielding and giving way—**the modest gentleman**. **Strong bones** means a robust, upright bearing—**able to shoulder the cosmos, standing between Heaven and Earth**. Emptiness of heart is the consummation of Mencius’s “not moved in heart”—when the heart is already empty, what could still be moved? Fullness of belly is the effect of nourishing the **vast, flooding qi**; such qi can fill Heaven and Earth—hence “fill the belly.” “Softening the will” corresponds to **holding to one’s will** without stubbornness; “strengthening the bones” corresponds to **the back brimming with strength**. When the heart is empty, the will naturally softens; with an empty heart that includes even beyond the heavens, there is no “will” left to insist on. When the belly is full, the bones naturally become strong; the **vast qi** is supremely great and supremely firm.

These four—**empty heart, full belly, softened will, strengthened bones**—are also the workings of the *Great Changes* (the *Yijing*): **Qian** is Heaven, the clear and empty qi; **Kun** is Earth, the broad and thick image—hence **empty vs. full**. Though **Qian** is clear and empty qi, its three lines are unbroken—within it is utmost **solidity**; what is solid calls for emptiness—hence “**empty the heart**.” Though **Kun** is broad and thick, its six lines are broken—within it is utmost **emptiness**; what is empty calls to be filled—hence “**fill the belly**.” **Li** (Fire) occupies the pre-celestial position of **Qian** and functions on its behalf; but **Li**, being fire, is prone to agitation—hence “**soften the will**.” **Kan** (Water) occupies the pre-celestial position of **Kun** and functions on its behalf; but **Kan**, being water, is lord of softness—hence “**strengthen the bones**.” The subtlety here is beyond reckoning; without **actual practice and experience** one does not know it. If one truly gains experience and then gains position to carry the Dao into action, simply **rectify the root and clear the source**, and those slick clever fellows will bow and bend, no longer daring to play their crafty, scheming tricks. Governing the world then becomes as easy as turning over the hand.

Rulers of later ages, lacking the true Dao-virtue of the sages, took only a **smattering of the surface**: today **select the worthy**, tomorrow **amass wealth**. Commentators often gloss “**hard-to-get goods**” as **rare curios and precious things**—not wrong; but **money** too is hard to get and even more prized. Thus people form **factions**, **puff one another up**, even **purchase reputation with money**; superiors and inferiors **scramble for profit**, **rob** one another, and in the end **become thieves who pierce walls and pry roofs**. Alas—when things have come to this pass, why not return to the **root**?

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