

Author's Preface

This young student has had the good fortune to be born in an age of worldly progress and invention in the study of implements. On water there are steamships. On land there are trains. Soaring aloft there are aeroplanes. Plunging beneath the waves there are submarines. Truly the five continents have become one household, and ten thousand nations one room. Moreover, everything we handle and use, everything we see and hear -- every sort of machine -- is nothing if not convenient and exquisite. What manifold good fortune! What manifold happiness! When I drink the water, I think of its source: I cannot help but admire and feel grateful toward the ancient sages who invented the study of implements.

And yet -- the ancient sages who invented the study of implements did so with the noble intention of enriching the nation and benefiting the people; they harbored no malice toward anyone. They could not have foreseen that people of savage cruelty and callous inhumanity would seize upon the fruits of the study of implements and forge poisoned rifles and poisoned cannons, slaughtering their fellow beings across all under Heaven. The great masters of implements-learning, for all their ingenious hands and brilliant minds, were not only helpless to prevent this -- they were themselves exploited, pressed into service manufacturing lethal implements. All those exquisite machines could not only not resist the guns and cannons; they were commandeered to transport soldiers and carry provisions, to relay intelligence. Seen in this light, good fortune has turned into calamity. Progress has become the advance of poison. Progress pressed to its extreme has driven our fellow beings straight into a forest of rifles and a rain of bullets.

Ha! Can this good fortune still be enjoyed? Can this progress still be called progress?

I venture to say that the ancient sages who invented material civilization, if their spirits could know, would not only bitterly resent those who manufacture guns and cannons -- they themselves would surely be filled with regret. For when sages educate all under Heaven, they must first teach people the knowledge of moral principle, and only then teach them the knowledge of technical skill. (Technical skill does not merely mean manufacturing -- it includes every kind of cunning stratagem and calculating mind. But cunning arises from mechanical ingenuity: "those who engage in mechanical affairs develop mechanical hearts.") When this order holds, technical skill assists moral principle, and moral principle, aided by technical skill, shines all the more brightly. When moral principle shines, all under Heaven is naturally at peace. But if people are not taught moral principle first and are instead taught technical skill first, then technical skill feeds their passions and desires, and moral principle is ruined. (In all the world, those who possess technical skill but lack moral principle invariably fall into dissolute indulgence, wanton excess, and every kind of vice -- because they grow arrogant relying on their abilities, and because money makes it possible.) When moral principle is ruined, all under Heaven naturally falls into chaos. This is the great root of the disorder that has afflicted all under Heaven these past several centuries.

This young student has long carried this pain hidden in his heart. I have already touched on it briefly in earlier writings, but because of the prevailing tide of opinion I did not dare speak in full,

fearing that to do so would be futile and only invite ridicule. This year, in the eighth month, the weather turned mild and peaceful, and I had just finished annotating the *Dao De Jing*. I ascended Mount Tai to mark its completion. Reaching the summit, I gazed out in all four directions. I saw mists of sorrow and gloom -- dense, congealed -- darkening the sky and blotting out the sun. I heard cries of grief and anguish -- shaking the earth and startling the heavens. Without realizing it, my heart ached and my eyes stung. I truly could not bear to remain silent. So I asked a Daoist priest on the mountain for brush and ink, and with each word a tear, I set down the thoughts of my heart as they came -- a respectful address to my fellow beings across all under Heaven. Even if I am called deranged and delusional, I will not shrink from it.

Consider this analogy: tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, elephants, and other fierce beasts -- their savage strength surpasses that of bandits a hundredfold, yet the harm they do is ten-thousandfold less. If someone were to teach them technical skill and put rifles and cannons in their hands, they would surely devour all of humankind and still not fill the abyss of their appetites. This is why people of moral principle are selective in imparting technical skill and refuse to transmit it lightly. The martial arts of Bodhidharma, the swordsmanship of the Daoist schools -- these are examples. Is this miserliness in teaching? Is this an unwillingness for people to have technical skill? It is because one must guard against future catastrophe and cannot afford to be anything but careful.

This is why the *Great Learning* says: "Things have root and branch; affairs have beginning and end. To know what comes first and what comes after -- this is to draw near to Dao." That is to say: moral principle is the root, material achievement is the branch. Moral principle should come first; material achievement should follow. (The "things" in "the investigation of things" refers to material desires, not to the principles of physics -- earlier Confucians already made this distinction clear.)

Were it otherwise -- consider: our nation was the first to achieve civilization. Sages emerged generation after generation -- the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Kings Wen and Wu, the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, Mencius -- all persons of unfathomable, godlike capabilities. Some invented agricultural implements, musical instruments, and flood-control apparatus. Some built the armillary sphere. Some created the compass. Some were renowned for the beauty of their craftsmanship. Some were famed for the breadth of their learning. They were the progenitors of invention for the entire world. (Beyond these, there were Mozi, Lu Ban, Zhuge Liang -- in every generation there was no shortage of such figures, far too many to enumerate.) Could they not have built trains, steamships, and every kind of machine? Yet they confined themselves to speaking of moral principle and righteous conduct -- words that some dismiss as empty -- and did not pursue the practical applications of acoustics, optics, electricity, and chemistry. (The classical scriptures do in fact contain insights into acoustics, optics, electricity, and chemistry -- only expressed in condensed rather than detailed form.) The reason is precisely this: first cultivate the people's moral foundation, and only then teach them technical skill. (Those rulers after the Three Dynasties who deliberately kept the people ignorant in order to maintain their dynastic hold are a separate case.) For the time being, teach them just enough to serve their needs. This was the approach that our nation's sages, in governing all under Heaven through Dao, could not avoid.

Europe and America, failing to perceive this, vie with each other to mock our nation's learning as pedantic and antiquated. Our nation's learning may well be pedantic. But today the world has plunged into chaos to the utmost extreme -- I humbly invite the great masters of implements-

learning to build some machine that can come to the rescue. And yet this military catastrophe is not truly the fault of the materialists. Had moral principle and material science been advanced in tandem from the start, how could we have come to this extraordinary disaster? Still, Europe and America see our decadent state and laugh at us -- and rightly so.

What I find truly strange is this: the divine descendants of the Yellow Emperor, the followers of the balanced and upright teachings of Confucius and Mencius -- they have stooped to scavenge the scraps of the West's doctrines of killing, to pilfer the mere trappings of the West's killing-machines, and have swept away with a single stroke the great principles and great laws by which the Two Emperors, the Three Kings, and the lineage of Confucius, Zengzi, Zisi, and Mencius governed all under Heaven -- treating them as though they were arsenic and poisoned wine. How can their delusion have reached such a pass? They do not realize that the study of Dao can not only save our own nation from poverty and weakness, but can also deliver Europe and America from their calamities.

This is not something empty words can accomplish. One must forge a wondrous and unfathomable implement of Dao -- only then can it withstand the lethal implements of war.

After this young student completed his earlier annotations on the *Ceasefire Discourse*, I had already set my mind on forging such an implement. But after three years of painstaking thought and arduous research, I had neither a method nor any raw material. This spring, Mr. Yang Xianting expounded the Dao of the Most High and said that the Dao-energy of the Most High had already begun to stir, and that the time was ripe to study the *Dao De Jing*. It also happened that Mr. Liu Liqing sent me his recently written *Words of Goodness* -- embodying the spirit of sharing goodness with others, in great impartiality and selflessness. Inspired by this purpose, I too took up the *Dao De Jing* and began to read.

When I reached the two phrases "the great fashioning does not sever" and "the nameless unhewn wood" -- I was suddenly and completely awakened. "The method and the raw material are all right here!" I cried.

Because the matter was of the utmost gravity, I followed the example of Muhammad in fasting and ritual purification, cleansing my body and mind. Then I followed the example of Christianity in offering prayers, beseeching the Lord on High. From the *Analects* I obtained the carpenter's square that Confucius employed at age seventy, and the ox-cleaver that Ziyou wielded at the town of Wucheng. From the Buddhist scriptures I obtained the principles of the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation and the Wisdom of Accomplished Action. (The method of "the great fashioning does not sever" -- if you forge an implement from it alone, people will not accept it. Only when you add the Buddhist Dharma does the implement become truly fit for use.)

Then, using the Buddhist Dharma to survey the state of all under Heaven, I ascertained that the celestial cycle had reached its zenith and the terrestrial energies had begun to open. Taking the carpenter's square of Confucius, I measured the nameless unhewn wood of Laozi. Upon measuring, I found that though this unhewn wood was a seamless whole, earlier scholars had already divided it -- using a method akin to chemistry -- into two great parts and eighty-one small sections. Moreover, over a hundred craftsmen-commentators had each worked upon it as they pleased: the great

artisans fashioned great implements, the lesser workmen made lesser ones -- the quality need not be debated, for none of them suited the present age.

Fortunately, this unhewn wood is divine unhewn wood. Though chiseled down to smallness by every craftsman, it remains inexhaustible and unfailing, and can always return to its original substance, whole and undivided. At this I was both astonished and overjoyed, yet did not dare put my hand to it. So I stilled all idle thoughts and concentrated my vital energy. My body became like withered wood; my heart became like dead ashes. I felt the harmony of Heaven arrive; the spirit came to dwell within me. Then, meeting it with spirit rather than sight, I took up the ox-cleaver and, letting my hand follow of its own accord, began to cut -- even more wondrously, I dare say, than Cook Ding carving the ox for Lord Wenhui.

When the cutting was finished and I looked, it was still a seamless whole -- the implement of one who, as the noble person, "is not reduced to a single implement." Yet examined closely, it was formless yet possessed form, and was likewise divided into two great parts and eighty-one small sections. For when plying the cleaver, I had split along the great crevices and guided it through the great cavities, following the natural structure that earlier scholars had already established -- hence the same number of divisions as theirs. Only the form and the manner of use were entirely different from those of my predecessors. Though it may not match the exquisite refinement of earlier commentators, it is suited to the needs of the present day.

As for its form: the first half bears a striking resemblance to the blue-green ox that Laozi rode -- transforming and soaring aloft. The second half resembles the carriage upon which Confucius sat, the kind described in the *Doctrine of the Mean* as "running on a common gauge." The first half governs movement. The ox's strength is immense: wherever the sun and moon shine, wherever frost and dew descend, wherever ships and boats reach, wherever human effort extends -- wherever there are beings of blood and breath, it can go. The second half governs what is carried. The interior of the carriage is exceedingly spacious: the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the *Analects*, the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Mencius* -- all the scriptures and commentaries of the sages and worthies can be loaded aboard. On top of these I have added a measure of the Hundred Schools of thought and the Twenty-Four Histories for ready reference.

Yet this young student, given the exigencies of the times, has from among ten thousand volumes cast away the dregs of the Lesser Prosperity and transcribed only the essence of the Great Unity.

Wherever this ox-cart goes, it radiates auspicious light and harmonious energy, forming bonds of humaneness, righteous conduct, and moral principle. Nations are naturally at peace and the people joyful. What a fine and precious implement! Everyone who sees it bursts into applause and marvels.

Only one friend -- a rather obtuse fellow -- said: "This implement of Dao of yours is fine enough, but why not invite someone to ride in the cart and give a discourse?" I answered him: "Look at the illustration on the first page -- do you not see the person there?"

But after the implement was completed, I worried: with just one ox and one cart, how could they possibly travel across all under Heaven? By good fortune, Mr. Ye Xiting came to my lodgings.

Seeing the implement, he was overjoyed. He raised capital and commissioned artisans in Shanghai to reproduce it -- one thousand copies, every one identical to the original.

But this young student has never attended a specialized academy. I have never studied the science of implements. I do not understand the principles of physics. I do not understand manufacturing. Whether what I have made is fit for use or not, I cannot be certain. I humbly dare only to present it to the nations of the world and beg the great masters of implements-learning to offer their guidance -- that would be my good fortune.

There is one more vital thing I must declare in advance. If the implement proves unfit for use, nothing more need be said. But if it does prove useful -- when all under Heaven is at peace at last, I shall take it back. For the nameless unhewn wood of Laozi long ago declared that "the great fashioning does not sever." This young student could not bear the world's upheaval and so took it upon himself, willfully forging it into an implement of Dao to save the age. When its work is done, I shall restore it to its original substance and return the nameless unhewn wood to Laozi. I would not dare borrow it long and never return it. One must uphold the great trust.

*Fifteenth day of the eighth month, eighth year of the Republic of China [1919]
Jiang Xizhang, a youth from Licheng, Shandong*

Revision #1

Created 2026-03-10 22:26:04 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-10 22:26:08 UTC by Phil