

Chapter 19



Translation

Sever ability, discard cunning —
the people benefit a hundredfold.

Sever humaneness, discard righteousness —
the people return to filial devotion and loving care.

Sever cleverness, discard profit —
thieves and bandits cease to exist.

These three, as mere refinements, are not enough.
Therefore, let the people have something to hold to:
perceive the unadorned, embrace the unhewn —
diminish self-interest, be without desire.

Word Notes

- 卍 — "**sever**": To cut off absolutely, to bring to an end.
- 卍 — "**ability**": Capability, skill. Not "sagehood" — the author glosses this character specifically as "ability."
- 卍 — "**the plain**": The original, unadorned substance.

Chapter Explanation

Without recourse to ability and having **discarded cunning**, the people will naturally not compete through ability and cleverness — their **benefit will be a hundredfold**. **Without recourse to humaneness** and having **discarded righteousness**, the people will naturally not pursue the empty fame of humaneness and righteousness, and will **return to filial devotion and loving care**. **Without recourse to cleverness** and having **discarded profit**, the people will naturally not become greedy and deceitful, and **thieves and bandits will cease to exist**. These **three things** the Sage regarded as ornamental refinements, **insufficient** to transform all under Heaven. Therefore he taught the hundred families to find another allegiance — to perceive their original face, to embrace the genuine sincerity of pristine simplicity, to diminish self-interest, and to be without greedy desire.

Discourse

This chapter elaborates the meaning of the preceding chapter, teaching people to return to the pure simplicity and nonaction of high antiquity — the fine tradition of not recognizing virtue as such and not knowing the ruler's hand.

Yet Laozi also harbored a certain grievance. The customs of the age had grown thin and debased: everyone practiced deception and fraud, and things had reached the extreme. If a person did not resort to cunning schemes and deceitful stratagems, he could not survive in the world. It had almost come to the point where everyone in all under Heaven was the equivalent of thieves who tunnel through walls and climb over fences. If we trace this to its root cause, the blame lies with those old and deeply cunning ones who deceived people with false humaneness and counterfeit righteousness. Through mutual influence, this became the prevailing custom, flowing ever further downward, until it fermented into this wretched state of affairs. All the fine words the ancients spoke — humaneness, righteousness, sagehood, wisdom — were appropriated by deceitful schemers who used them as stock-in-trade for cheating people.

Laozi wished to set things right, yet he was buried away in his post as Keeper of the Archives, without political power, and could do nothing about it. Therefore he spoke from the reverse side, in order to startle the world awake. How could he truly have been disparaging sagehood, wisdom, humaneness, and righteousness?

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:34:40 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:42:11 UTC by Phil