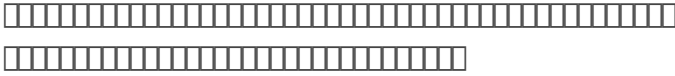


Chapter 3



Translation

Do not exalt the worthy,
and the people will not contend.
Do not prize goods hard to obtain,
and the people will not steal.
Do not display what stirs desire,
and the heart will not fall into chaos.

Thus the Sage governs:
emptying the heart,
filling the belly,
softening the will,
strengthening the bones.

Ever guiding the people toward innocence
and freedom from craving,
so that even the clever dare not contrive.

Practice nonaction,
and nothing remains ungoverned.

Word Notes

- □ — "**the worthy**": means those of outstanding ability.
- □ — "**contend**": means to compete and seize.
- □ — "**goods**": means merchandise, commodities.
- □ — "**steal**": means theft.
- □ — "**desire**": means cravings, appetites.
- □ — "**empty**": means to make empty, hollow.
- □ — "**fill**": means to make full, substantial.
- □ — "**soften**": means to make gentle, yielding.
- □ — "**strengthen**": means to make firm, unyielding.

Chapter Explanation

Do not exalt the worthy — this causes the people not to compete for reputation. **Do not prize goods hard to obtain** — this causes the people not to steal wealth. **Do not display the objects of craving** — this causes the people's hearts not to fall into chaos. For this reason, when the Sage governs: he **empties the heart** to rid it of extravagance; he **fills the belly** to restore it to simplicity; he **softens the will** to put an end to contention; he **strengthens the bones** to enable self-reliance. He always causes the people to be without cunning and without cravings, so that even those of talent and intelligence dare not engage in deceit or scheming. They settle peaceably into nonaction — and all under Heaven is effortlessly governed.

Discourse

The order in which Dao generates is: one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three. One is the Dao of Heaven. Two is the way of mutual opposition and alternation between yin and yang. Three is the way of humanity — composed of the first and the second, the central pivot of Dao. Therefore, Chapter One expounds the Dao of Heaven. Chapter Two expounds the way of mutual opposition and mutual alternation. This chapter expounds the way of humanity: inner sagehood and outer kingship.

Outer kingship must be rooted in inner sagehood. One must possess Heavenly virtue before one can exercise the kingly way. Only when one can govern one's own person can one govern all under Heaven. In ancient times, Emperor Yao harmonized the myriad states entirely through his ability to brilliantly manifest exalted virtue. Emperor Shun's doubled radiance aligned with the ancient emperors entirely through composing himself and facing south.

Therefore the Sage governs all under Heaven by taking self-governance as the root. When one can govern oneself — emptying the heart, filling the belly, softening the will, strengthening the bones — all under Heaven is governed through nonaction.

If the heart is not empty, selfish desires abound. If the belly is not full, hunger and want abound. Mencius said, "To be without this is to be starving" — and starving is precisely not full. If the will is not soft, one becomes restless and impetuous. If the bones are not strong, one becomes timid and weak.

To empty the heart is to make it embrace all beyond the Great Void — possessing nothing at all. To fill the belly is to fill the space between Heaven and Earth, containing everything. A softened will means yielding one's own position to follow others — the modest, modest gentleman. Strengthened bones means shouldering the universe, standing on the earth with head touching the sky.

Emptying the heart is the ultimate realization of Mencius's unmoved heart. If the heart is already empty and void, from where could it be moved? Filling the belly is the result of nurturing the flood-like qi to fullness. Flood-like qi can fill the space between Heaven and Earth — hence, filling the belly. "Belly" conveys the sense of containing and holding. It certainly does not mean gorging oneself on wine and meat!

Softening the will corresponds to Mencius's "holding the will." Strengthening the bones corresponds to Mencius's image of inner virtue overflowing to the back.

When the heart is empty, the will is naturally soft, for the empty heart encompasses all beyond the Great Void — there is no will left to speak of. When the belly is full, the bones are naturally strong, for the flood-like qi is supremely great and supremely firm.

This — emptying the heart, filling the belly, softening the will, and strengthening the bones — also corresponds to the functions of the trigrams Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li in the *Book of Changes*.

Qian is the qi of Heaven, pure and void. Kun is the image of Earth, broad and thick. Hence the pairing of empty and full. Yet though Qian is the pure, void qi of Heaven, its three lines are all unbroken — its interior is supremely full. What is full should be emptied; hence: empty the heart. Though Kun is the broad, thick image of Earth, its six lines are all broken — its interior is supremely void. What is void should be filled; hence: fill the belly.

Li occupies Qian's position in the Pre-celestial diagram, acting in Qian's stead. But Li is fire and tends toward restlessness; hence: soften the will. Kan occupies Kun's position in the Pre-celestial diagram, acting in Kun's stead. But Kan is water and tends toward yielding; hence: strengthen the bones.

The numinous wonder within this cannot be known except through actual practice and personal experience. If one has practiced and attained realization, and then gains a position to carry out Dao, one need only rectify the root and purify the source. Then those cunning spirits will naturally bow their heads and fold their ears in submission, not daring again to use deceit and scheming to stir up chaos. Governing all under Heaven would be as easy as turning over one's hand.

In later ages, those who led the state lacked the Sage's true Dao and De. They merely took up the surface trappings. Today they exalt the worthy; tomorrow they amass wealth. Goods hard to obtain — most commentators interpret this as rare treasures, which is fair enough. But money is also hard to obtain, and is even more prized. The result is that everyone forms factions and cliques, each group promoting its own members. It reaches the point where people spend money to purchase reputation. High and low compete for profit, plundering one another — until they have become thieves who tunnel through walls and climb over fences.

Alas! When things have reached such a state, why not turn back and seek the root?

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:33:58 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:41:37 UTC by Phil