

Chapter 71



Translation

To know yet seem not to know — this is the highest.
Not to know yet think you know — this is a sickness.
Only by recognizing sickness as sickness
does one become free of it.
The Sage is free of sickness
because he recognizes sickness as sickness.
And so he is free of sickness.

Word Notes

- 病 — "**sickness**": Harm, affliction.

Chapter Explanation

To know yet not regard oneself as knowing — this is the highest. Not to know yet regard oneself as knowing — this is a great sickness. Only the one who recognizes sickness as sickness can be free of sickness. The Sage is free of sickness precisely because he recognizes sickness as sickness; therefore he is free of sickness.

Discourse

Confucius once admonished Zilu, saying: "To know what you know and to know what you do not know — this is true knowledge." This is roughly similar to the meaning of this chapter. But Laozi's words go a step further.

Yet Laozi has another meaning as well. In times when all under Heaven is in chaos, right and wrong are necessarily jumbled together, and perverse theories run rampant. Those who know say they know; those who do not know also say they know. They go so far as to issue pronouncements and compose books. They themselves do not understand, yet they lead others into confusion. They carry a sickness of which they are unaware, and still they would infect all the people under Heaven. The disorder reaches such a point that even those with true insight can find no peace of body or mind. Those who are free of sickness are equally helpless. It very nearly makes every nation under Heaven a nation of the confused, and every person a patient.

This is why Laozi explains it repeatedly — to teach people to examine themselves and cure their own sickness.

I, this young student, in annotating this chapter, feel deeply moved. For I myself am already one who does not understand. Because the people of the world have overused their cleverness, I have become all the more confused. I myself am already a person of softness and weakness. Because the people of the world are fond of war and killing, I have developed a growing sickness of the heart.

I know that among the people of the world there must be those who share my affliction and feel the same compassion. Where can I find a good and wise teacher to dispel my foolish delusion? Where a great physician to attend to my sickness of the heart?

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:37:42 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:43:57 UTC by Phil