

Chapter 74



Translation

When the people no longer fear death,
what good is it to threaten them with death?
If the people could be made always to fear death,
and we seized the deviant and put them to death,
who then would dare?
There is always one whose office it is to kill.
To kill in place of this executioner
is to hew wood in place of the master carpenter.
Of those who hew in place of the master carpenter,
few escape cutting their own hands.

Word Notes

- 匠 — "**carpenter**": A woodworker.
- 斲 — "**to hew**": To chop open wood.

Chapter Explanation

The people are not afraid to die. How then can those who govern insist on using death to frighten them? If you could make the people always fear death, then the ones who act in strange and lawless ways — I could seize and execute them, and who would dare commit lawless acts again? But the more you kill, the more such people appear. Clearly the people do not fear death.

Moreover, when the people have committed crimes, there is always a judicial authority who executes them according to public law. Yet there are those who would replace that authority and kill on their own private authority. This is like someone who does not understand the compass and square yet presumes to hew wood in place of the master carpenter. Those who hew wood in place of the master carpenter rarely escape cutting their own hands.

Discourse

When the Sage transforms all under Heaven through Dao and De, he causes the people to understand the root of reverence. They naturally become as if ten eyes were watching them, ten

hands pointing at them. They are watchful in what others cannot see and apprehensive in what others cannot hear. If they exercise such care even in what is hidden and subtle, how much less will they commit crimes and foment rebellion in the open! What need is there to rely on penal law?

Moreover, using penal law to kill and suppress the populace — the people are not afraid of it. It is not that the people do not fear death by nature. It is that times of harsh punishment are necessarily times of chaos. The people cannot get through a single day without hardship, and they have nowhere to put their hands and feet. Having lost all hope of living, how would they fear death?

Furthermore, those who administer punishments are not necessarily free of manipulating the law to serve private ends. When the penal law itself is unjust, the people refuse to fear it all the more. Even if they did fear it, it would be hard to avoid falling into the legal net. And so people come to see breaking the law and fomenting rebellion as a path to survival, and keeping the law and living quietly as simply waiting to die. The result is mutual slaughter, and great upheaval erupts.

Alas! Even Confucius said, "Lead them with policies and align them with punishments, and the people will evade trouble but have no sense of shame" — and that was merely a warning about insufficient governance. How much worse to lead them by indiscriminate slaughter, to align them with brutality and cruelty! How could all under Heaven not be thrown into chaos?

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