

TRANSCENDING DECLINE

Holding to fullness
Is not as good as stopping in time.

Sharpness that probes
Cannot protect for long.

A house filled with riches
Cannot be defended.

Pride in wealth and position
Is overlooking one's collapse.

Withdrawing when success is achieved
Is the Tao in Nature.

After developing situations and achieving success, Evolved Individuals do not linger to experience the inevitable cycle of decline. They know that if they stop to identify with their accomplishments, their inner growth will end and their downfall will begin. Nothing is static in nature. All things that reach their full maturity — whether plants and animals or planets and stars — must necessarily decline. Therefore Evolved Individuals never stop growing and never accumulate social or material burdens to slow their progress. When their work is done, they move on to the next task. In this way, they develop greatness and power.



功成身退。天之道。
金玉滿堂。莫之能守。
持而盈之。不如其已。

富貴而驕。自遺其咎。
揣而稅之。不可長保。

NINE

Better stop short than fill to the brim.

Oversharpen the blade, and the edge will soon blunt.

Amass a store of gold and jade, and no one can protect it.

Claim wealth and titles, and disaster will follow.

Retire when the work is done.

This is the way of heaven.

Same as non-attachment



THE USE OF FORCE

The finest weapons can be the instruments of misfortune,
And thus contrary to Natural Law.
Those who possess the Tao turn away from them.
Evolved leaders occupy and honor the left;
Those who use weapons honor the right.

Weapons are instruments of misfortune
That are used by the unevolved.
When their use is unavoidable,
The superior act with calm restraint.

Even when victorious, let there be no joy,
For such joy leads to contentment with slaughter.
Those who are content with slaughter
Cannot find fulfillment in the world.

The use of force to alter worldly events is regarded in this passage as a sometimes necessary evil. The "finest weapon" might be a powerful army or may be as subtle as a sharp intellect or a clever strategy — yet when it is used to exert force over another, it is "contrary to Natural Law." Thus there will be an unfortunate counter-reaction.

When the use of force is unavoidable, Evolved leaders practice restraint. Furthermore, they know that force will enhance personal power only to the extent that it is regrettable. Once victory is achieved, they do not allow themselves to feel joy; instead, they express regret. Their attitude strongly affects their organization, and thus internal conflicts are regarded as a matter of sorrow as well. Therefore a regretful attitude in leaders during times of external force can have a calming and peaceful effect on the internal affairs of the organization.

The word *left* refers to the left hand — the hand most reluctant to reach out and act. The right hand is associated with strength and assertiveness. This idea was further elaborated upon by Wang Pi (c. 226-249), who wrote one of the earliest commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching*, in a passage often attached to Lao Tzu's:

On the left, undertakings bring good fortune.
On the right, undertakings bring misfortune.
The second in command occupies the left;
The commander occupies the right.
That is, they arrange themselves as in rites of mourning.

For the slaughter of many,
Let us grieve with heartfelt sorrow.
For a victory in battle,
Let us receive it with rites of mourning.



則不可得志於天下矣

夫樂殺人者。

勝而不美。而美之者是樂殺人。

兵者不祥之器。非君子之器。不得已而用之。恬淡爲上
君子居則貴左。用兵則貴右

夫佳兵者不祥之器。物或惡之。故有道者不處。

THIRTY-ONE

Good weapons are instruments of fear; all creatures hate them.
Therefore followers of Tao never use them.
The wise man prefers the left.
The man of war prefers the right.

Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools.
He uses them only when he has no choice.
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,
And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing;
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself.

On happy occasions precedence is given to the left,
On sad occasions to the right.
In the army the general stands on the left,
The commander-in-chief on the right.
This means that war is conducted like a funeral.
When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.