

Not Lao-tzu's Magna Carta, lxiv - lxxii

by strannikov

lxiv

defense is easy when you're not under siege,
an anticipated event can be met.
what is fragile shatters when dropped from on high,
what remains yet small is readily dispersed:
deal with it while it's next-to-nothing,
maintain order before disorder breaks out.

a tree you can't wrap your arms around
once was thinner than a small finger.
a tower nine stories tall
began with one course of bricks.
that thousand-mile-long journey
starts from the dirt underfoot.

nothing on earth can be perfected,
no one rule can preserve or sustain.
because sages do without doing,
they do not spoil things:
because they do not strive to sustain,
they do not lose things.

folks' pursuits are often lost right at the end:
when care guides both beginning and end—success.

thus do sages yearn not to desire,
nor to esteem goods hard to obtain:
they study not to study

and they learn to cease knowing
and they teach to stop teaching
and return to what folks have passed by—
they could help the ten thousand find their own Way
but do not presume to offer help.

lxv

the ancient ones who hewed to the Way
did not do so to enlighten folks
but instead to keep them bamboozled.
folks have grown hard to govern,
convinced that they know how to plot their own path.

relying on knowledge to govern the state
serves only to undermine the state:
disdaining craft in order to rule the state
supports and strengthens the state.

these two models to constantly know
permit one to know the principle,
and the principle to ever know
is ever known as “shadowed virtue”.

dark deep and remote is this shadowed virtue:
when things return to their source,
it precedes, accompanies, follows.

lxvi

what makes emptying rivers and filled oceans
the kings to mountain valleys and streams?
that they stretch out below them:

this makes them the kings of the hundred valleys.

thus the sage, if he desires to raise the folk,
must keep himself lower than his words:
if the sage desires to go before the folk,
he must himself stand behind his words.

So:

if he stands above a crowd of folk,
they are not weighed down with a tiresome burden.
if he stands before a crowd of folk,
they do not find him an obstacle.
thus do the ten thousand take delight in him,
because he does not oppress.

content not to contend, none with him contend.

lxvii

the whole world says my Way is "Great", but—
most, I am sure, only mean "unlike",
which is as good, the great being unlikely:
"being likely" is to have no distinction,
lacking distinction my Way could not be "Great".

three treasures I always clasp and clutch:
one is consideration,
two is thriftiness,
three is refusal to lead the world.
considerate, I can well afford courage,
thrifty, I can afford to be generous,
refusing to lead the world,
I can polish all sacred vessels.

So:

courage without consideration,
generosity without a shred of thrift,
charging ahead and escaping the sacred
is the sure path straight to death.

considerate, your fights will yield victory,
your defenses will prove insurmountable:
Heaven itself defends the considerate.

lxviii

a good soldier does not wear valor.
dependable fighters do not wear anger.
who defeats his enemy awaits attack.
able commanders know how to take orders.

this virtue of not striving,
guiding men's abilities,
is called "meeting with Heaven"—
the ancients' high attainment.

lxix

war strategists with wisdom say this:
"do not be the master of the house
but behave as an invited guest—
do not dare advance a single inch
but be ready to retreat a foot".

marching an army without forward movement,
rolling up sleeves without showing arms,
deploying a weapon that cannot be seen,

launching attack where the enemy is not.

never underestimate a foe:
not guessing his strengths is to risk losing all—
when two equal forces collide in battle,
the victor is he who prevails with regrets.

lxx

see how easily these words are understood,
see how easily they are practiced:
but no one understands them,
and no one puts them into practice.

having said little, I now say less:

words have their own ancestors,
deeds are commanded by their own lords.
knowledge and thought do not make me understand—
no surprise, then, that I am not understood.

because so few come to understand,
so do I remain rare and treasured:
thus do sages dress in rags
and wear jade only within.

lxxi

understand that you don't know
and you'll know that you don't understand.
the diagnosis sickens:
victims of diagnosis sicken—no cure!

the sage grows sick of sickness,
thus is his health not impaired.

lxxii

when folks have no sense of dread,
a greater dread will overtake them.

don't make their houses smaller,
don't deplete their wherewithal:
because you lay no burden on them,
they bear with you, if not with gladness.

thus is the sage self-aware, without display,
self-concerned, without being conspicuous:
thus he rejects acclaim to manage himself.

