

Lao Tzu: 37 / 道德經, 章第三十七

by Michael D. Johnson, MA, MAOM, Lic.Ac.
(© 2016 Michael D. Johnson)

*The Classic Text:**

道常無為而無不為。侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而欲作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸。無名之樸，夫亦將無欲。不欲以靜，天下將自定。

The Translation:

The [best method] is to do nothing, and thereby allow nothing not to be done. If [politicians and business leaders] could keep to this method, then everything [in society] would [take care of itself]. If I were to write about this process, I'd call it Nameless Simplicity. This Nameless Simplicity is without desire. Not having desire, it is motionless, and so the whole world naturally settles [around it].

The Commentary:

This text is filled with seeming contradictions. In this passage, for instance, we find the bizarre idea that doing nothing can accomplish everything. Could the author possibly be suggesting that the groceries will pick up themselves while I stay home to watch the game? Probably not. There's got to be something else going on here.

There are things I do on a daily basis which don't require any extra effort - for example, I eat breakfast, I relax into the sunset, I study Chinese classics. If I were to make a to-do list, I probably wouldn't add these items to the list since they just come naturally. Things which require a bit of effort, though, would make the list.

Now, imagine you could figure out a way to take items off your list...not by finishing the job, but by shifting them into the "doesn't require any extra effort" category. If you were able to remove all the items from your list in this way, your perspective would change quite a bit. Gone would be the mad rush from one task to the next, and in its place would be a gradual unfolding.

In the clinic, it's important to keep this more natural attitude in mind. When approaching a patient, if one focuses on only the line-item, the symptom, one may miss the forest for the trees. But if one is willing to follow a more meandering path, the way often becomes clear.

Translation Notes:

* It is hard to pin down authorial intent when it comes to Lao Tzu, and as a result there are many different interpretations in the English-speaking market. This particular translation is rooted in a close study of ancient Chinese political, cosmological and medical texts.

[best method]: Dao4 道 is usually translated as 'Way'. The trouble with this translation is that it lends itself to a disembodied interpretation, as though there is some sort of transcendental Way above and beyond ordinary life. 'Method' does not have this drawback.

[politicians and business leaders]: literally 'marquises and kings'. While these folks may have been the movers and shakers of Chinese society when this text was written, translating this as 'politicians and

business leaders' is more appropriate to today's world.

[in society]: This is an addition for clarification. While the text literally reads 'the ten thousand things' - which is to say 'everything' - without a bit more context this would remain too abstract for the reader. A case could be made that the addition should read 'in the social and natural worlds'.

[take care of itself]: literally 'naturally-transform'. This requires a bit of an explanation. In Chinese medical texts it is often said that yang transforms into yin and yin transforms into yang. This process is naturally harmonious and beneficial, but can become perverted. If we read on in this text, we see that when transformation is happening properly, there is no desire. This is because the elements in the process of transformation 'feel' complete in themselves, and so do not need anything more than themselves to transform. As a result, they 'take care of themselves'.

[around it]: an addition for clarification. We are never taking a 'God's eye view' in Chinese medical theory or philosophy. If the world settles down and becomes harmonious when applying this method, it is not because it has reached some abstract ideal, but rather because the person performing the method has allowed all his own relationships (i.e., links to the world) to settle.