

道德經

Chapter 1

This opening line plays with multiple meanings of 道 (dao) as both 'speak/explain' and 'way/path' - a profound philosophical wordplay that sets up the entire text.

道 可 道 非 常 道 .
way can speak not constant way

This line parallels the first, using 名 (name) in place of 道 - suggesting deep connections between naming/language and reality.

名 可 名 非 常 名 .
name can name not constant name

無 (without) and 有 (with/having) form an important philosophical pair in Daoist thought. Notice how these two lines mirror each other.

無 名 天 地 之 始 .
without name heaven earth 's beginning

有 名 萬 物 之 母 .
with name ten-thousand things 's mother

以 is a versatile grammatical particle - here it indicates using one thing to achieve another.

故 常 無 欲 以 觀 其 妙 .
therefore constant without desire by-means-of observe its subtlety

常 有 欲 以 觀 其 徼

constant with desire by-means-of observe its boundary

兩 literally means 'two' but here refers to the previous contrasting statements. Notice how 而 connects related ideas.

此 兩 者 同 出 而 異 名

these two ones same emerge yet different name

同 謂 之 玄

same called it dark/mysterious

玄 (mysterious darkness) is repeated, intensifying its meaning - like peering into deeper and deeper mysteries.

玄 之 又 玄

dark/mysterious 's further dark/mysterious

門 (gate/door) is a powerful metaphor - suggesting these mysteries are an entrance to understanding.

眾 妙 之 門

many subtle 's gate

Chapter 2

This opening line sets up a profound philosophical observation about how we perceive beauty and its opposite. Notice how '之' marks the object, and '為' here means 'to be considered as'

天 下 皆 知 美 之 為 美 斯 惡
heaven below all know beautiful it be beautiful then ugly
已 .
already

Notice how this line parallels the structure of the previous one, a common Classical Chinese rhetorical device called 'parallel prose' (駢文)

皆 知 善 之 為 善 斯 不 善 已 .
all know good it be good then not good already

'相' is a key word appearing throughout this chapter, indicating mutual relationship or reciprocal action

故 有 無 相 生 .
(therefore) have nothing mutually generate

難 易 相 成 .
difficult easy mutually complete

長 短 相 較 .
long short mutually compare

高 下 相 傾 .
high low mutually incline

音 聲 相 和 .
tone sound mutually harmonize

前 後 相 隨 .
before after mutually follow

'是以' is a common Classical Chinese phrase introducing a conclusion or result

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

'無為' is a key Daoist concept - try to piece together what it might mean from the literal characters

處 無 為 之 事
dwell nothing do of matter

行 不 言 之 教
practice not speak of teaching

Notice how '作' here might mean 'arise/occur' rather than 'make/do'

萬 物 作 而 不 (始) .
ten-thousand thing arise and not (begin)

生 而 不 有

give-birth and not possess

為 而 不 恃 .

do and not rely-on

功 成 而 弗 居 .

achievement complete and not dwell

夫 唯 弗 居 .

(indeed) only not dwell

A powerful conclusion that plays on multiple meanings of '去' - to leave/depart/remove

是 以 不 去 .

this by-means-of not leave

Chapter 3

This opening line sets up a profound theme about leadership - notice how '尚' (exalt) and '賢' (worthy/talented) create a statement about how NOT to govern

不 尚 賢

not exalt worthy

See how this line follows from the previous - what happens when leaders don't exalt the worthy?

使 民 不 爭

cause people not compete

Note how '難得' (difficult-obtain) modifies '貨' (goods) - Classical Chinese puts modifiers before the noun

不 貴 難 得 之 貨

not value difficult obtain of goods

使 民 不 為 盜

cause people not become thief

'見' here means 'show/display' rather than just 'see' - consider how this relates to leadership

不 見 可 欲

not show can desire

使 民 心 不 亂 。

cause people heart not chaos

'是以' is an important Classical Chinese conjunction meaning 'therefore/thus'

是 以 聖 人 之 治 。

this by-means-of sage person of govern

Notice the parallel structure between '虛其心' and '實其腹' - what contrast is being drawn?

虛 其 心 實 其 腹

empty their heart fill their belly

Another parallel structure! The sage creates balance through apparent opposites

弱 其 志 強 其 骨

weaken their ambition strengthen their bone

常 使 民 無 知 無 欲 。

always cause people without knowledge without desire

'夫' here is a particle marking the topic - the wise ones

使 夫 智 者 不 敢 為 ____ 。

cause that wise one not dare act

This famous final line plays with the word '為' (act/do) - notice how it appears twice with different meanings. The particle '矣' marks completion of the thought

為 無 為 則 無 不 治 [矣] .
act without action then without not govern [indeed]

Chapter 4

This opening line uses the metaphor of a vessel (盅) - a common theme in Daoist texts where emptiness enables usefulness.

道 (盅) 而 用 之 (有) 不 盈 .
way (hollow-vessel) and use it (exist) not fill

Notice the particle 兮 (xi) - it creates a poetic pause and adds emphasis. 淵 (deep) often refers to still water - a key image in Daoism.

淵 兮 似 萬 物 之 宗 .
deep ! seem ten-thousand thing 's ancestor

挫 其 銳 .
blunt its sharpness

解 其 紛 .
unravel its tangles

Notice how the next three lines follow a parallel structure - verb + 其 + noun. This is a common poetic device in Classical Chinese.

和 其 光
soften its light

同 其 塵
unite its dust

湛 (clear/deep) pairs with 淵 (deep) from earlier - creating a circular structure. 或 here creates ambiguity - is it 'perhaps' or 'someone'?

湛 兮 似 或 存 .
clear ! seem perhaps exist

A fascinating line expressing uncertainty about origins - who is the 'child' here? Consider how this connects to the 'ancestor' mentioned earlier.

吾 不 知 誰 之 子 .
I not know who 's child

帝 refers to the supreme deity/emperor - what does it mean to precede even that? This line connects to ancient Chinese cosmology.

象 帝 之 先 .
appear deity 's before

Chapter 5

This opening line sets up a profound paradox using 不仁 (not-benevolent). But 仁 (benevolence) is a core Confucian virtue - why would heaven and earth lack it? Consider: Perhaps true impartiality requires treating everything equally, without human-like favoritism?

天 地 不 仁

heaven earth not benevolent

芻狗 (straw-dogs) refers to ceremonial objects that were treated with great reverence during rituals but discarded afterwards. This powerful metaphor appears twice - what might it suggest about the nature of heaven's relationship to all things?

以 萬 物 為 芻 狗 .

by-means-of ten-thousand things make straw dog

聖 人 不 仁 .

sage person not benevolent

以 百 姓 為 芻 狗

by-means-of hundred surnames make straw dog

之間 is a common grammatical pattern meaning 'between/among' - look how Classical Chinese builds complex ideas from simple parts!

天 地 之 間

heaven earth of between

橐籥 (bellows) refers to the tool used by ancient metalworkers to blow air into a forge. Notice how it's empty yet inexhaustible - what parallel might this draw with the Dao?

其 猶 橐 籥 乎
it like bellows bellows question

Notice how 而 connects contrasting ideas - empty YET not depleted. Classical Chinese loves these elegant oppositions!

虛 而 不 屈
empty and not exhaust

動 而 愈 出 .
move and more produce

數 here means 'frequently' - Classical Chinese often uses count words as adverbs. How efficient!

多 言 數 窮
many words count exhaust

守中 (keep-center) is a key Daoist concept. What might it mean to 'keep to the center' in terms of speech and action?

不 如 守 中
not like keep center

Chapter 6

This opening line introduces a profound concept using natural imagery. Consider what a valley (谷) represents - what are its characteristics? Empty yet containing, hollow yet powerful...

谷 神 不 死
valley spirit not die

'玄牝' (dark-female) is one of the most mysterious terms in Daoism. 謂 is how we name or call something - what follows is a special term.

是 謂 玄 牝
this called dark female

門 (gate/door) is a powerful metaphor in Chinese philosophy - think about what a door represents: passage, potential, transition between states...

玄 牝 之 門
dark female of gate

Note how 根 (root) connects to the earlier valley imagery. In Classical Chinese, when you see '之' connecting terms, it often shows possession or relationship.

是 謂 天 地 (之) 根 .
this called heaven earth of root

绵绵 is a reduplication (repeated character) suggesting continuity. 若 often introduces a simile - 'as if' or 'like.' What kind of existence is being described?

綿 綿 若 存

continuous

continuous

as-if

exist

Notice how 用 (use/utilize) connects to the idea of practical application. 勤 suggests laborious effort - what might this say about how we should approach this mysterious force?

用 之 不 勤

use

it

not

toil

Chapter 7

This opening line sets up a profound observation about heaven and earth's endurance

天 長 地 久

heaven long earth enduring

Here's where Classical Chinese grammar gets interesting - 'suo yi' (所以) is a common grammatical construction meaning 'that by which' or 'the reason why'

天 地 所 以 能 長 且 久 者

heaven earth that-which by-means-of can long and enduring one-who

Notice how 自 (self) modifies 生 (live/give-birth) - what could it mean to not 'self-live'?

以 其 不 自 生 .

by-means-of its not self live

故 能 長 生 .

(therefore) can long live

Here we meet the 聖人 (sage) - a key figure in Daoist philosophy. Watch how the following lines describe their paradoxical behavior

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

This line plays with position (先/後) - what happens when you put yourself last?

後 其 身 而 身 先 .

behind his body yet body ahead

外 其 身 而 身 存

outside his body yet body exists

邪 here is an archaic particle indicating a rhetorical question - can you see how this line questions the reason for the sage's survival?

非 以 其 無 私 邪 .

is-not by-means-of his without self-interest (rhetorical)

Notice how this conclusion mirrors the pattern from earlier - 故 (therefore) leading to an outcome. What's the relationship between having no self-interest and fulfilling it?

故 能 成 其 私 .

(therefore) can accomplish his self-interest

Chapter 8

This opening line sets up a powerful metaphor comparing the highest good to water. The character 若 (like/as) creates this simile.

上 善 若 水

highest good like water

Notice how 而 (and/yet) creates a contrast between the two parts of this line, showing water's paradoxical nature.

水 善 利 萬 物 而 不 爭

water good-at benefit ten-thousand things yet not compete

眾 means 'many/crowd' while 所 is a grammatical particle that nominalized what follows it - literally 'that which people hate/detest'

處 眾 人 之 所 惡

dwell many person 's that-which detest

幾 suggests 'approaching/nearly' - water's nature brings it close to the Dao

故 幾 於 道 [矣] .

therefore near to way [indeed]

居 善 地

dwelling good-at place

淵 refers to deep, still waters - suggesting the heart/mind should be like a deep pool

心 善 淵 .

heart good-at depths

與 善 仁

giving good-at benevolence

言 善 信 .

speech good-at trust

正 善 治 .

governing good-at order

事 善 能

affairs good-at ability

動 善 時 .

movement good-at timing

夫 is often used to introduce a conclusion. Notice how this ties back to water's non-competing nature mentioned earlier

夫 唯 不 爭 .

indeed only not compete

The final line reveals the ultimate result - 尤 means 'fault/blame'. Can you see how this connects to water's qualities described above?

故 無 尤 .
therefore without blame

Chapter 9

This opening line sets up a common pattern in Daoist thought - what happens when we try to hold onto or maintain extremes

持 而 盈 之
hold and fill it

An interesting construction using 不如 (not-like/prefer) to make a comparison - a gentle way of suggesting an alternative

不 如 其 已
not like its stop

揣 is a fascinating character showing hands measuring or handling something - think about trying to sharpen something to its absolute peak

揣 而 (銳) 之
handle and (sharp) it

不 可 長 保 .
not can long maintain

A vivid image that would have resonated with readers in ancient China - what happens when we accumulate too much?

金 玉 滿 堂
gold jade full hall

莫 之 能 守 .

none it able guard

Notice how 而 is used here to connect two related concepts - wealth/status and pride.
What relationship does it suggest?

富 貴 而 驕

wealth noble and pride

自 (self) combined with 遺 (leave-behind) creates a powerful image of self-inflicted consequences

自 遺 其 咎

self leave-behind its blame

This line introduces a profound natural law - what happens after reaching the peak of success?

功 遂 身 退

achievement complete body withdraw

The chapter concludes by elevating this observation to a cosmic principle - 天之道 is a phrase that appears several times in the Dao De Jing

天 之 道 .

heaven of way

Chapter 10

This opening line introduces profound concepts about cultivating one's inner essence. 載 (carry) and 營 (manage/nurture) create a sense of actively maintaining something precious.

載 營 魄 抱 一
carry nurture soul embrace one

Notice how 能 (can/able) starts this and several following lines - creating a rhythmic pattern of questioning capability.

能 無 離 乎
can without separate question

氣 refers to vital life force/energy - a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy. 致 means 'bring forth' but implies directing or focusing.

專 氣 致 柔
focus energy bring-forth soft

嬰兒 (infant) is a powerful metaphor in Daoism - what qualities might an infant possess that make it worth emulating?

能 嬰 兒 乎
can infant child question

玄 is a fascinating character meaning 'dark/mysterious' - but it's often used to refer to profound wisdom or the Dao itself.

滌 除 玄 覽

cleansc remove mysterious view

疵 means blemish/ flaw - consider what it means to be without flaws in the context of Daoist thought.

能 無 疵 乎

can without flaw question

This line shifts to governance - notice how personal cultivation (previous lines) connects to ruling.

愛 民 治 國

love people govern country

無為 (without-action) is a key Daoist concept - but what kind of action is it suggesting to avoid?

能 無 為 乎

can without action question

天門 (heaven-gate) is rich with meaning - what might 'opening and closing' of heaven's gate represent?

天 門 開 闔

heaven gate open close

雌 (female) is often used in Daoism to represent receptivity and nurturing qualities.

能 為 雌 乎
can be female question

四達 literally means 'four directions' but implies comprehensive understanding or enlightenment.

明 白 四 達
bright clear four reach

能 無 [以] 知 乎
can without by-means-of know question

Notice how these next lines describe actions and their relationship to attachment.

生 之 畜 之
give-birth it nurture it

生 而 不 有
give-birth but not possess

為 而 不 恃
act but not rely-on

長 而 不 宰
grow but not control

玄德 (mysterious virtue) appears as a conclusion - how do all the previous lines lead to this concept?

是	謂	玄	德
this	called	mysterious	virtue

Chapter 11

This opening line presents a tangible image of a wheel - notice how the numbers add up to something significant...

三十輻共一轂
three ten spoke together one hub

Here we encounter a key grammatical pattern that will repeat - 當其 (when/at) followed by 之用 (its use). Pay attention to how 無 (nothing) and 有 (something) create contrast.

當其無有車之用。
when its nothing has chariot of use

埴 refers specifically to clay for pottery - consider why the text chooses such a hands-on, craftsman-like example

埴埴以爲器
knead clay by-means-of make vessel

當其無有器之用。
when its nothing has vessel of use

戶牖 refers to doors and windows - notice how each example (wheel, vessel, room) creates increasingly larger spaces

鑿戶牖以爲室
carve door window by-means-of make room

當 其 無 有 室 之 用 .

when its nothing has room of use

故 signals a conclusion is coming. How does this final couplet relate to all the examples above?

故 有 之 以 為 利

(therefore) have it by-means-of make benefit

This final line creates a profound parallel with the previous one. What's the relationship between 利 (benefit) and 用 (use)?

無 之 以 為 用 .

nothing it by-means-of make use

Chapter 12

This line introduces a powerful metaphor about sensory overload. The structure '令人' (make/cause people) is repeated throughout, creating a pattern about how excess affects our senses.

五 色 令 人 目 盲 .
five color make person eye blind

五 音 令 人 耳 聾 .
five sound make person ear deaf

Note how '爽' here doesn't mean 'pleasant' as in modern Chinese - in Classical Chinese it meant 'lose sensitivity/taste'

五 味 令 人 口 爽
five flavor make person mouth numb

This line uses hunting terminology. Notice how the four-character compound '馳騁畋獵' creates a vivid image of intense pursuit.

馳 騁 畋 獵 令 人 心 發 狂
gallop sprint hunt chase make person heart emit madness

難 得 之 貨 令 人 行 妨
difficult obtain of goods make person conduct obstruct

Here '是以' (therefore) introduces the sage's response to all the previous statements. What follows is the solution to the problems described above.

是 以 聖 人 .
this by-means-of sage person

This line presents a contrast using parallel structure with '為' (act-for). What's the difference between acting for the belly versus the eyes?

為 腹 不 為 目
act-for belly not act-for eye

'故' (therefore) signals a conclusion. The contrast between '彼' (that) and '此' (this) creates a clear choice between two paths.

故 去 彼 取 此
therefore remove that take this

Chapter 13

This opening line uses a powerful parallel structure comparing honor and disgrace to being startled - suggesting both are equally disruptive states of mind.

寵 辱 若 驚
favor disgrace like startle

Here we see 大患 (great-trouble) paired with 身 (body/self) - consider why the self might be connected to our greatest concerns.

貴 大 患 若 身 .
value great trouble like body/self

This rhetorical question structure (何謂) is common in Classical Chinese - it's setting up an explanation of the first line.

何 謂 寵 辱 若 驚
what call favor disgrace like startle

Notice how 為 (become) is used here - it's describing a reaction to receiving favor. The grammar pattern X 為 Y means 'X becomes Y' or 'X is Y'.

寵 為 下 得 之 若 驚
favor become below obtain it like startle

失 之 若 驚 .
lose it like startle

是 謂 寵 辱 若 驚
 this call favor disgrace like startle

何 謂 貴 大 患 若 身
 what call value great trouble like body/self

This line introduces a complex cause-and-effect relationship. Notice how 所以 (therefore) and 為 (because) work together to express causation.

吾 所 以 有 大 患 者 為 吾
 I that-which by-means-of have great trouble one-who because I
 有 身 .
 have body/self

Consider the logic here - what happens to troubles when there is no self?

及 吾 無 身 吾 有 何 患
 if I not-have body/self I have what trouble

故 (therefore) signals this is a conclusion being drawn from previous statements.

故 貴 以 身 為 天 下 .
 therefore value by-means-of body/self for heaven below

若 可 [以] 寄 天 下 [矣] .
 if can [by-means-of] entrust heaven below [indeed]

The final two lines present a parallel structure using 寄 (entrust) and 託 (consign) - consider how these related but distinct words create subtle meaning differences.

愛 以 身 為 天 下
love by-means-of body/self for heaven below

若 可 [以] 託 天 下 [矣] .
if can [by-means-of] consign heaven below [indeed]

Chapter 14

This opening triplet establishes three qualities of the Dao using parallel structure with '視/聽/搏' (look/listen/grasp) followed by negation '不'. This is a classic rhetorical device in Classical Chinese.

視 之 不 見 名 曰 夷
look it not see name call subtle

聽 之 不 聞 名 曰 希
listen it not hear name call rare

搏 之 不 得 名 曰 微 .
grasp it not obtain name call minute

'致詰' (thorough-questioning) is a compound verb - notice how Classical Chinese often combines characters to create more complex meanings.

此 三 者 不 可 致 詰 .
these three ones not can thorough question

故 混 而 為 一
therefore blend and become one

[一 者]
[one one]

'皦/昧' (bright/dark) form a contrasting pair - notice how Classical Chinese often uses opposites to express totality.

其 上 不 皦 .
its above not bright

其 下 不 昧 .
its below not dark

'繩繩' is a reduplication suggesting continuity or endlessness. '[兮]' is a particle that adds poetic rhythm.

繩 繩 [兮] 不 可 名 .
continuous continuous [poetic-particle] not can name

復 歸 於 無 物 .
return return to without thing

Note how '無 X 之 X' (without-X's-X) is a paradoxical construction that appears twice here - this is a key philosophical device in Daoism.

是 謂 無 狀 之 狀
this called without form of form

無 物 之 象
without thing of image

是 謂 惚 恍
this called indistinct vague

迎 之 不 見 其 首
meet it not see its head

隨 之 不 見 其 後
follow it not see its behind

執 古 之 道
hold ancient of way

以 御 今 之 有 .
by-means-of control present of existence

能 知 古 始
able know ancient beginning

是 謂 道 紀
this called way principle

Chapter 15

This opening line describes the ideal ancient sage/scholar using four profound qualities that are intentionally abstract and mysterious.

古 之 善 為 士 者 微 妙 玄
ancient of good act-as scholar one-who subtle wonderful dark/mysterious
通
penetrating

Note how 不可 (cannot) combines with 識 (know/recognize) - a common Classical Chinese grammatical pattern expressing impossibility.

深 不 可 識 .
deep not can know

夫 唯 不 可 識
(now) only not can know

故 強 為 之 容
(therefore) force make it appearance

The text now shifts to a series of vivid similes using 兮 (an emphatic particle) and 若 (like/as) to create poetic descriptions. Notice how each gives a distinct feeling or mood.

豫 兮 若 冬 涉 川
hesitant ! like winter ford river

猶 兮 若 畏 四 鄰
cautious ! like fear four neighbors

儼 兮 其 若 (客)
dignified ! it like (guest)

Notice how this line uses the blank space () to create a pause before the impending action.

渙 兮 若 冰 — 將 釋
melting ! like ice about-to dissolve

敦 兮 其 若 樸
genuine ! it like uncarved-wood

曠 兮 其 若 谷
vast ! it like valley

混 兮 其 若 濁
confused ! it like muddy

This line introduces a profound question using 孰 (who). Notice how 以 connects the two actions - making muddy water clear through stillness.

孰 能 濁 以 靜 之 徐 清
who can muddy by-means-of still it gradually clear

孰 能 安 以 久 動 之 徐 生
who can peaceful by-means-of long movement it gradually live

保 此 道 者 不 欲 盈
preserve this way one-who not desire full

夫 唯 不 盈
(now) only not full

The final line contains bracketed words that modify the meaning. Try to understand how [以] functions as a connector and how [而] creates a contrast.

(是) [以] 能 蔽 [而] 不 — 成
(this) [therefore] can cover [yet] not complete

Chapter 16

This opening line sets up a profound meditation on emptiness/void (虛). The character 致 suggests 'reaching towards' or 'bringing to the utmost.'

致 虛 極 .

reach void utmost

篤 is a fascinating character showing dedication/sincerity - originally depicted as a drum being struck repeatedly.

守 靜 篤 .

maintain stillness sincere

並 is a pictograph of two people standing side by side - here suggesting simultaneous arising.

萬 物 並 作

ten-thousand things together arise

觀 shows a bird's-eye view - suggesting careful observation from above. Notice how [其] acts as a possessive marker.

吾 以 觀 [其] 復 .

I by-means-of observe [its] return

芸芸 is a reduplication suggesting abundance/multiplicity - like seeing endless waves of grass swaying.

夫 物 芸 芸 各 復 歸 其 根 .
now things abundant abundant each return go-back its root

歸 根 曰 靜
return root called stillness

謂 implies naming or designation - consider how names shape our understanding of concepts.

[靜] 是 謂 復 命
[stillness] this called return destiny

復 命 曰 常 .
return destiny called constant

明 depicts sun and moon together - suggesting illumination/clarity through understanding the constant.

知 常 曰 明 .
know constant called bright

Note how 妄 (rash/reckless) pairs with 凶 (misfortune) - suggesting cause and effect.

不 知 常 妄 作 凶
not know constant reckless act misfortune

知 常 容
know constant contain

Notice how the text builds from 容 (containing) to increasingly expansive concepts - 公 (common/public) to 王 (king) to 天 (heaven).

容 乃 公
contain then common

公 乃 王
common then king

王 乃 天
king then heaven

天 乃 道
heaven then way

道 乃 久
way then enduring

沒身 literally means 'sink/disappear body' - consider what it means to face no danger (不殆) even as the body passes away.

沒 身 不 殆
sink body not danger

Chapter 17

This opening line sets up a hierarchy of leadership styles. Notice how '太上' (highest/supreme) pairs with '下' (below/subordinate) - a common Classical Chinese parallel structure.

太 上 下 知 有 之
supreme high below know exist it

Notice how '親' (close/intimate) contrasts with the previous line's distant knowing. What might this say about different styles of leadership?

其 次 親 而 譽 之
its next close and praise it

其 次 畏 之
its next fear it

Watch how these four lines create a descending scale of ruler-subject relationships, from best to worst.

其 次 侮 之
its next despise it

'信' appears twice in this line - first as 'trust' and then in 'distrust'. Consider how the placement affects the meaning.

信 不 足 焉 有 不 信 ____
trust not sufficient therein exist not trust

'猶' suggests hesitation or deliberation - what might this imply about speaking?

(猶) 兮 其 貴 言 .
(hesitate) ah its value words

Notice how '成' and '遂' are near-synonyms - this reinforces the completeness of achievement.

功 成 事 遂
merit complete matter accomplish

A fascinating conclusion - '自然' (self-so) is a key concept in Daoism. Consider: why do the people think things happened 'naturally'? What does this tell us about the best kind of leadership?

百 姓 皆 謂 我 自 然 .
hundred surnames all say I self so

Chapter 18

This opening line sets up a profound cause-and-effect relationship that continues throughout the chapter. Notice how each section follows a similar pattern.

大 道 廢 .

great way abandon

Consider how this line connects to the previous one - what emerges when the 'great way' is abandoned?

有 仁 義

exist benevolence righteousness

The character 慧 refers to quick-wittedness while 智 refers to wisdom - together they create an interesting compound suggesting calculated cleverness rather than true wisdom.

慧 智 出 .

clever-wisdom emerge

The character 偽 is particularly interesting here - it can mean artificial, false, or pretense. Consider what makes something 'great falseness'

有 大 偽

exist great false

六親 refers to the six family relationships in Classical Chinese society - consider why they're mentioned here and what their disharmony might represent

六 親 不 和
six relations not harmony

有 孝 慈
exist filial-piety kindness

昏亂 is a compound meaning chaos/disorder - but look at the individual characters: 昏 (dusk/confused) and 亂 (disorder). What imagery does this create?

國 家 昏 亂 .
country family confused disorder

The final line presents 忠臣 (loyal ministers) - but consider the context of all previous lines. Is their emergence a positive or negative thing?

有 忠 臣
exist loyal minister

Chapter 19

This opening line sets up a provocative statement about rejecting conventional wisdom and virtue - notice how 絕 (cut-off) and 棄 (abandon) are strong, decisive verbs

絕 聖 棄 智
cut-off sage-wisdom abandon knowledge

Notice how 百 (hundred) combines with 倍 (times) to create emphasis on magnitude

民 利 百 倍 .
people benefit hundred times

仁 and 義 are core Confucian virtues - benevolence and righteousness. What might it mean to abandon these?

絕 仁 棄 義 .
cut-off benevolence abandon righteousness

復 (return) is a key concept in Daoism - what natural state might people return to?

民 復 孝 慈 .
people return filial-piety kindness

絕 巧 棄 利
cut-off cleverness abandon profit

Consider the logic: what's the relationship between rejecting profit-seeking and the absence of theft?

盜 賊 無 有 .

thief bandit not exist

文 can mean 'culture/refinement/education' - what might it mean that these three things are 不足 (not-sufficient)?

此 三 者 以 為 文 不 足 .

these three things by-means-of make refinement not sufficient

故 令 有 所 屬 .

therefore cause have that-which belong

素 refers to raw silk or plain white - a metaphor for simplicity

見 素

see plain

樸 refers to uncarved wood - another powerful metaphor for natural simplicity

抱 樸

embrace simplicity

少 私

diminish private

The chapter concludes with four short, powerful phrases that embody the alternative to conventional virtue and knowledge. Notice how they build on each other.

寡 欲 .

few

desires

Chapter 20

This opening line sets up a fascinating paradox about learning and worry. Notice how 絕 (cut-off) and 學 (study/learning) create tension.

絕 學 無 憂

cut-off learning not-have worry

These words 唯 and 阿 are interesting - they're often used as verbal particles expressing agreement/compliance. Think about what it means to compare ways of saying 'yes'!

唯 之 與 阿

yes it and yes

相 去 幾 何

mutually apart how-many what

Notice how this line mirrors the structure of the previous comparison, but now contrasts beauty and ugliness.

(美) 之 與 惡

(beautiful) it and ugly

相 去 若 何

mutually apart like what

This line contains a complex grammatical construction with multiple negatives - a common feature in Classical Chinese.

人 之 所 畏 不 可 不 畏 .

person possessive that-which fear not can not fear

兮 is a poetic particle that adds rhythm and emphasis - notice how it changes the tone.

荒 兮 其 未 央 哉

vast ! it not-yet end !

眾 人 熙 熙

many person joyous joyous

太牢 refers to the grandest form of ritual sacrifice - what does this tell us about the scene being described?

如 享 太 牢 .

like enjoy great sacrifice

如 春 登 臺

like spring climb terrace

我 獨 泊 兮

I alone anchor !

其 未 兆

it not-yet show-sign

This beautiful metaphor compares the speaker to an infant - consider what qualities of an infant might be valuable to a Daoist perspective.

如 嬰 兒 之 未 孩
like infant child possessive not-yet smile

Chapter 21

This opening line sets up a profound discussion about the nature of virtue (德) and how it relates to the Dao. The character 孔 means 'great/vast' but is also associated with Confucius (孔子) - an interesting potential wordplay.

孔 德 之 容 (唯) 道 是 從
vast virtue of appearance (only) way this follow

Here we encounter two fascinating descriptive words 恍 and 惚 that try to capture the elusive nature of Dao. They suggest haziness, dimness, indistinctness - like trying to describe something just at the edge of perception.

道 之 為 物 (唯) 恍 (唯) 惚
way of being thing (only) vague (only) indistinct

Notice how the particle 兮 (xi) is used poetically to create rhythm and emphasis. This gives the text an almost chant-like quality.

惚 兮 恍 兮 其 中 有 象 .
indistinct ah vague ah its within exist image

恍 兮 惚 兮 其 中 有 物 .
vague ah indistinct ah its within exist thing

窈 and 冥 both refer to darkness/obscurity but with slightly different connotations - 窈 suggests deep/remote while 冥 suggests darkness/mysterious. What might be hidden in such depths?

窈 兮 冥 兮 其 中 有 精 .
deep ah dark ah its within exist essence

其 精 甚 真
its essence very real

其 中 有 信
its within exist truth

Notice how Classical Chinese can express time spans elegantly - just two characters 今 (now) and 古 (ancient) can express 'from ancient times until now'

自 (今) 及 (古)
from (now) reach (ancient)

其 名 不 去
its name not depart

甫 is a fascinating character - it can mean 'beginning' or 'origin' but also carries the sense of 'measuring' or 'judging'. What might it mean to 'observe all beginnings'?

以 閱 眾 甫 .
by-means-of examine many beginning

吾 何 以 知 眾 甫 之 (然) 哉
I how by-means-of know many beginning of (thus) indeed

以 此 .

by-means-of this

Chapter 22

This opening line introduces a recurring pattern: 'X 則 Y' meaning 'if X then Y'. Notice how each line follows this structure, creating a poetic rhythm.

曲 則 全 .
bend then complete

Consider how these first two lines might be related - what happens when something bends vs when something becomes straight?

枉 則 直 .
crooked then straight

窪 (hollow/depression) pairs with 盈 (fill) - notice how many of these lines present apparent opposites that transform into each other.

窪 則 盈
hollow then fill

敝 則 新 .
worn-out then new

These two lines about 'little' and 'much' form a complementary pair. What might this suggest about quantity and understanding?

少 則 得 .
little then obtain

多 則 惑 .

much then confused

是以 (therefore) often introduces a conclusion or application of previous principles. 聖人 (sage) is a key concept in Daoist philosophy.

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

式 here means 'model/standard' - consider what it means for the sage to 'embrace oneness' as a model for the world.

抱 一 [以] 為 天 下 式

embrace one [by-means-of] make heaven below model

The next four lines follow a powerful pattern: 不自 X 故 Y (not self-X therefore Y). Watch how this creates a profound teaching about humility.

不 自 見 故 明

not self see therefore bright

不 自 是 故 彰

not self right therefore distinct

不 自 伐 故 有 功 .

not self boast therefore have merit

不 自 矜 故 長 .
not self pride therefore endure

夫唯 often introduces an important statement - here it emphasizes the significance of 'non-contention'.

夫 唯 不 爭
indeed only not contend

故 天 下 莫 能 與 之 爭
therefore heaven below none able with it contend

古之所謂 means 'what the ancients called' - this line begins a reflection on the chapter's opening statement.

古 之 所 謂
ancient of that-which called

曲 則 全 者
bend then complete one-who

豈 is a rhetorical question marker - consider how this line challenges readers to reflect on the truth of the opening statement.

豈 虛 言 哉 (.) .
how empty words indeed ()

This final line brings everything full circle - 誠 (truly/sincerely) emphasizes the authenticity of the transformation described.

誠 全 而 歸 之
truly complete and return it

Chapter 23

This opening line sets up a profound observation about nature's way of expression - 'xi' (希) meaning 'rare/sparse' hints at the Dao's minimal use of words.

希 言 自 然
rare words self so

Notice how Classical Chinese uses concrete natural phenomena (wind, rain) to illustrate abstract principles. 故 (therefore) often signals an explanation or evidence following.

(. 故 飄 風 不 終 朝
therefore whirling wind not last-through morning

驟 雨 不 終 日 .
sudden rain not last-through day

孰 (who/what) introduces a rhetorical question. Notice how Classical Chinese often leaves the verb 'to be' implicit.

孰 為 此 者 天 地 .
who do this one-who heaven earth

天 地 尚 不 能 久
heaven earth even not can endure-long

況 introduces a rhetorical comparison - 'if even X cannot, how much less can Y?' This is a common Classical Chinese rhetorical device.

而 況 於 人 乎 (。
and moreover at person eh

(。 故 從 事 於 道 者
therefore follow affairs at Way one-who

This section establishes a parallel structure comparing three types of people - those who align with Dao, De (virtue), and failure. Notice the repetition.

道 者 同 於 道
Way one-who same as Way

德 者 同 於 德
virtue one-who same as virtue

失 者 同 於 失 。
lose one-who same as lose

同 於 道 者
same as Way one-who

樂 here means 'joy/gladness' - notice how the Dao is personified as taking joy in finding those who align with it.

道 亦 樂 得 之
Way also joy obtain it

同 於 德 者
same as virtue one-who

德 亦 樂 得 之
virtue also joy obtain it

同 於 失 者
same as lose one-who

失 亦 樂 得 之
lose also joy obtain it

This final line presents a logical paradox about trust/faith (信) that invites deep reflection. Consider: what happens when trust is insufficient?

信 不 足 焉 有 不 信 —
trust not sufficient herein have not trust

Chapter 24

This chapter begins with a series of parallel constructions that follow a common Classical Chinese pattern: [Person who X] + negative + [result]. Notice how each line builds on similar ideas.

企 者 不 立
tiptoe one-who not stand

The character 跨 gives us a vivid image of someone trying to take too big of a step. Think about what happens when you try to walk while taking exaggerated steps...

跨 者 不 行
stride one-who not walk

自 (self) appears in the next four lines, creating a theme about self-perception and self-promotion. 見 here means 'to see' but implies displaying oneself.

自 見 者 不 明
self see one-who not bright

自 是 者 不 彰 .
self right one-who not distinct

功 (merit/achievement) is a key concept in Chinese philosophy - what kind of achievement is possible for someone who constantly boasts?

自 伐 者 無 功
self boast one-who without merit

長 can mean 'grow' or 'excel' - consider how self-pride (矜) might prevent growth.

自 矜 者 不 長
self pride one-who not grow

Here the text shifts to discuss how these behaviors relate to the Dao. 其 often points back to previously mentioned ideas.

其 在 道 也
it exist-in way indeed

This line uses food metaphors - 餘 (excess) and 贅 (superfluous) paint a picture of waste and unnecessary actions.

曰 餘 食 贅 行 .
say excess food superfluous conduct

物 或 惡 之
things perhaps detest this

The final line introduces a conclusion with 故 (therefore). Consider how this relates to the previous descriptions of self-promoting behavior.

故 有 道 者 不 處 .
therefore have way one-who not dwell

Chapter 25

This opening line introduces a mysterious 'something' - notice how 混成 (mixed-complete) suggests a primordial state of wholeness

有 物 混 成
exist thing mixed complete

A temporal marker showing this 'thing' predates even heaven and earth - what could be so fundamental?

先 天 地 生
before heaven earth born

兮 is a poetic particle that adds rhythm and emphasis - these characters paint a picture of absolute stillness and emptiness

寂 兮 寥 兮
silent ! vast-empty !

Notice how 獨立 (alone-stand) creates a powerful image of independence and self-sufficiency

獨 立 不 改
alone stand not change

周 suggests completeness/all-around motion - how does this contrast with the earlier stillness?

周 行 而 不 殆

complete move and not danger

Think about what quality would allow something to be the 'mother' of all under heaven

可 以 為 天 下 母

can by-means-of become heaven below mother

吾 不 知 其 名 .

I not know its name

字 refers to giving a designation - notice how the text struggles with naming the unnameable

字 之 曰 道

designate it say way

強 為 之 名 曰 大

force make it name say great

大 曰 逝

great say depart

逝 曰 遠

depart say far

Notice the circular logic: far leads to return - a key concept in Daoist thought

遠 曰 反
far say return

—— 道 大
way great

天 大
heaven great

地 大
earth great

王 亦 大
king also great

域 refers to the realm/world - notice how the text establishes a hierarchy of four great things

域 中 有 四 大
realm within exist four great

而 王 居 其 一 焉。
and king dwell its one therein

法 means to model/follow - watch how a chain of modeling unfolds

人 法 地

human model earth

地 法 天

earth model heaven

天 法 道

heaven model way

自然 literally means 'self-so' - what might it mean for the Dao to model that which is naturally self-so?

道 法 自 然

way model self so

Chapter 26

This opening line introduces a profound natural principle using weight metaphors. Notice how 'root' (根) is being connected to seemingly opposite qualities.

重 為 輕 根
heavy becomes light root

Similar to the first line, but now using movement metaphors. Consider how 'stillness' might master 'movement' - a key Daoist concept.

靜 為 躁 君
still becomes restless ruler

'jun-zi' (君子) is a compound meaning 'noble person' - literally 'ruler-child'. This term was important in ancient Chinese philosophy.

是 以 (君子) 終 日
this by-means-of (noble-one) throughout day

Notice how [其] (their) refers back to something - what might that be? What's being carried?

行 不 離 [其] 輜
travel not leave [their] baggage-cart

This line contains rich imagery. 榮觀 (glory-sight) paints a scene of splendor, while 燕 (feast) suggests luxury.

重 雖 有 榮 觀 燕
heavy although have glory sight feast

超然 gives us a sense of rising above or transcending - what might this suggest about the noble person's attitude?

處 超 然
dwell transcend thus

'萬乘' (ten-thousand-chariots) was a measure of a state's military might - it represents great power and authority.

奈 何 萬 乘 之 主
how what ten-thousand chariots of lord

Notice how 'light' returns here - but now as a negative quality. How does this connect to the first line?

而 以 身 輕 天 下
yet by-means-of body light heaven below

'Root' (本) appears again indirectly - compare with the first line about heaviness being the root of lightness.

輕 則 失 本
light then lose root

The chapter closes by returning to the stillness/restlessness theme from the second line. Consider how these opposite pairs (heavy/light, still/restless) relate to leadership.

躁 則 失 君
restless then lose ruler

Chapter 27

This line introduces the concept of skillful movement/action that leaves no traces - a profound Daoist ideal of effortless action (wu-wei)

善 行 無 轍 迹
skilled walk not-have wheel-rut trace

Notice the parallel structure with the first line - this one speaks of skilled speech that leaves no flaws

善 言 無 瑕 謫
skilled speak not-have flaw blame

Another parallel construction - 善數 here refers to counting or calculation

善 數 不 用 籌 策
skilled count not use counting-rod tally-stick

This line and the next form a pair about securing things without conventional means. Can you see how this relates to the theme of skillful action?

善 閉 無 關 鍵 而 不 可 開 .
skilled close not-have bar bolt yet not can open

善 結 無 繆 約 而 不 可 解 .
skilled tie not-have rope bind yet not can untie

是以 is an important Classical Chinese construction meaning 'therefore' or 'thus'

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

常 善 救 人
always skilled save person

故 is another key Classical Chinese word indicating causation or result

故 無 棄 人
therefore not-have abandon person

常 善 救 物
always skilled save thing

故 無 棄 物 .
therefore not-have abandon thing

襲明 is an interesting compound - 襲 means to inherit or succeed to, while 明 means brightness/enlightenment

是 謂 襲 明
this called inherit brightness

Notice how 之 is used here as a possessive particle - 'X 之 Y' means 'Y of X' or 'X's Y'

(故) 善 人 者 不 善 人 之 師
(therefore) good person one-who not good person 's teacher

不 善 人 者 善 人 之 資 .
not good person one-who good person 's resource

不 貴 其 師
not value their teacher

不 愛 其 資
not love their resource

雖 introduces a concessive clause - 'although/even though'. What kind of paradox is being presented here?

雖 智 大 迷
although wise great confused

要妙 combines 'essential' and 'mysterious' - what might this final characterization mean in context of the chapter's teachings?

是 謂 要 妙
this called essential mysterious

Chapter 28

This opening line uses contrasting pairs (雄/雌 male/female) to set up an important philosophical concept. Notice how 知/守 (know/keep) create a parallel structure.

知 其 雄 守 其 雌
know its male keep its female

谿 (valley-stream) is a powerful metaphor in Daoism - water naturally flows to low places, suggesting humility and naturalness.

為 天 下 谿
become heaven below valley-stream

為 天 下 谿
become heaven below valley-stream

常德 (constant virtue) is a key concept - notice how it appears multiple times in this chapter, always followed by 不 (not).

常 德 不 離
constant virtue not depart

嬰兒 (infant) represents a state of natural simplicity and authenticity in Daoist thought.

復 歸 於 嬰 兒
return go-back to infant child

Another contrasting pair (白/黑 white/black) following the same grammatical pattern as the opening line.

知 其 白 守 其 黑 .
know its white keep its black

為 天 下 式
become heaven below model

為 天 下 式
become heaven below model

常 德 不 忒
constant virtue not err

無極 (limitless) is a profound concept in Chinese philosophy - the state before differentiation.

復 歸 於 無 極
return go-back to without limit

A third pair of contrasts (榮/辱 glory/shame) completing the pattern established earlier.

知 其 榮 守 其 辱
know its glory keep its shame

為 天 下 谷
become heaven below valley

為 天 下 谷

become heaven below valley

常 德 乃 足

constant virtue then sufficient

復 歸 於 樸 .

return go-back to uncarved-block

樸 (uncarved block) is another key Daoist concept - representing natural simplicity before human intervention.

樸 散 則 為 器

uncarved-block scatter then become vessel

聖 人 用 之 則 為 官 長

sage person use it then become official chief

This final line contains profound wisdom about how true greatness works - notice how 制 (control/system) connects to the idea of the uncarved block.

故 大 制 不 割

(therefore) great system not cut

Chapter 29

This opening line sets up a hypothetical scenario about attempting to 'grasp/control' (取) the 'world/empire' (天下). Notice how 將 here serves as a future marker, and 欲 indicates desire/wish.

將 欲 取 天 下 而 為 之
will desire grasp heaven below and do it

Notice how 見 (see) is used metaphorically here - it's about perception/understanding rather than literal sight.

吾 見 其 不 得 已
I see its not obtain already

神器 (divine-vessel) is a powerful term - what kind of 'vessel' might the world/empire be? Why 'divine'?

[夫] 天 下 神 器 .
[indeed] heaven below divine vessel

不 可 為 也
not can do indeed

Notice the parallel structure in this and the next line - what's the relationship between 'defeat' and 'lose'?

為 者 敗 之
do one-who defeat it

執 者 失 之
grasp one-who lose it

故 物
therefore things

The next several lines present pairs of opposites using 或...或... (either...or...) structure. What natural phenomena might these describe?

或 行 或 隨
some go some follow

或 (歔) 或 吹
some (inhale) some blow

或 強 或 羸
some strong some weak

或 挫 或 隳
some defeat some destroy

是以 (therefore) often signals an important conclusion in Daoist texts. What kind of person is a 聖人 (sage)?

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

The final three lines follow a parallel structure, all beginning with 去 (remove/eliminate).
What might these three things have in common?

去 甚
remove excess

去 奢
remove extravagance

去 泰
remove extreme

Chapter 30

This opening line introduces a profound discussion about leadership and warfare. Notice how '以道' (by-means-of Way) is contrasted with '以兵' (by-means-of weapons) in the next line.

以 道 佐 人 主 者

by-means-of Way assist person ruler one-who

不 以 兵 強 天 下

not by-means-of weapons force heaven below

Notice how '還' (return/rebound) suggests consequences - a key theme in Daoist thought about how actions have natural reactions.

其 事 好 還

its affairs tend-to return

This vivid imagery of thorns growing where armies camp paints a powerful picture of war's lasting effects.

師 之 所 處 荊 棘 生

army of place dwell thorns brambles grow

焉 大 軍 之 後 必 有 凶 年

thereupon great army of after must have ill-fortune year

The next several lines use repetition of '果' (accomplish/result) with different warnings. This rhetorical device emphasizes restraint in victory.

善 者 果 而 已 .
good one-who accomplish and stop

不 敢 以 取 強 .
not dare by-means-of take force

果 而 勿 矜 .
accomplish and do-not boast

果 而 勿 伐 .
accomplish and do-not attack

果 而 勿 驕 .
accomplish and do-not pride

果 而 不 得 已
accomplish and not obtain already

果 而 勿 強 .
accomplish and do-not force

Here's a powerful observation about the natural way of things - consider how this relates to the previous warnings about force and pride.

物 壯 則 老
things strong then old

是 謂 不 道
this called not Way

不 道 早 已 .
not Way early end

Chapter 31

Note how '夫' often starts philosophical statements - it's like saying 'Now then...' or setting up an important point

夫 佳 兵 者 不 祥 之 器 .
now fine weapon one-who not auspicious of implement

物 或 惡 之 .
thing perhaps detest it

Notice how '故' introduces a conclusion or consequence - what logical connection is being made here?

故 有 道 者 不 處
therefore have way one-who not dwell

In ancient China, left was traditionally the position of honor in peaceful times - notice this contrast with the next line

君 子 居 則 貴 左
noble master reside then value left

用 兵 則 貴 右 .
use weapon then value right

兵 者 不 祥 之 器 .
weapon one-who not auspicious of implement

非 君 子 之 器 .
not noble master of implement

'不得已' is an idiom meaning 'having no choice' - literally 'not-obtain-already' - notice how Classical Chinese creates complex meanings from simple components

不 得 已 而 用 之
not obtain already and use it

恬 淡 為 上
peaceful plain be superior

— — (勿) 美 [也]
(do-not) beautify [indeed]

Look at how 是 (this) and 者 (one who) work together to point to specific people or actions

而 美 之 者 是 樂 殺 人 .
yet beautify it one-who this enjoy kill person

夫 樂 殺 人 者
now enjoy kill person one-who

Notice how 以 (by-means-of) connects actions to their results or methods - it's a key word for understanding relationships between concepts

—— 不 可 以 得 志 於 天 下 矣
not can by-means-of obtain will in heaven below indeed

.

[故] 吉 事 尚 左 .
[therefore] auspicious matter favor left

凶 事 尚 右 .
inauspicious matter favor right

This section describes military formations - notice how 將軍 (general) is composed of two characters that together mean something different from their individual meanings

[是 以] 偏 將 軍 居 左
[this therefore] secondary lead army stand left

上 將 軍 居 右
supreme lead army stand right

This is a powerful metaphor - what does it mean to treat military victory with funeral rites?

言 以 喪 禮 處 之 .
speak by-means-of mourning ritual handle it

殺 人 — 眾
kill person many

以 哀 悲 泣 之
by-means-of sorrow grief weep it

戰 勝 以 喪 禮 處 之 .
battle victory by-means-of mourning ritual handle it

Chapter 32

This opening line introduces a profound paradox about the Dao - something that has no fixed name yet is 'constant'

道 常 無 名 .
way constant without name

'pu' (樸) is a key concept meaning 'uncarved block' or natural simplicity - a metaphor for original nature before cultural refinement

樸 雖 小
uncarved-block although small

天 下 莫 能 臣 ____
heaven below none can subject

Notice how 守 (guard/keep) connects with 之 (it) - a common grammatical pattern showing action upon an object

侯 王 若 能 守 之
marquis king if can guard it

萬 物 將 自 賓 .
ten-thousand things will self guest

天 地 相 合 .

heaven earth mutual join

甘露 (sweet dew) was believed to be an auspicious sign of harmony between heaven and earth

以 降 甘 露 .

by-means-of descend sweet dew

民 莫 之 令

people none it command

而 自 均

yet self equal

This line marks a transition in the text, discussing how names/labels come into being

[焉] 始 制 有 名

[thereby] begin establish have name

名 亦 既 有

name also already have

夫 亦 將 知 止

then also will know stop

This line contains a profound insight about knowing when to stop - 殆 means 'danger' but implies potential disaster from not knowing limits

知 止 (所) 以 不 殆
know stop (that-which) by-means-of not danger

譬 道 之 在 天 下 .
compare way it exist heaven below

The chapter ends with a beautiful metaphor comparing the Dao to waters flowing - notice how 川谷 (streams and valleys) naturally flow to 江海 (rivers and seas)

猶 川 谷 之 (與) 江 海 .
like stream valley it (and) river sea

Chapter 33

This chapter follows a beautiful parallel structure, with each line following the pattern '[X] 者 [Y]'. The '者' marks the subject - similar to saying 'one who [X] is [Y]'. Let's see what qualities lead to what outcomes...

知 人 者 智 .
know others one-who wisdom

Note how this line mirrors the previous one, but replaces '人' (others) with '自' (self). What might this contrast tell us about different kinds of knowing?

自 知 者 明 .
self know one-who bright/clear

The pattern continues - now exploring victory/conquest (勝) over others...

勝 人 者 有 力 .
victory others one-who have strength

Again see how 'self' (自) creates a different meaning. Is conquering others the same as conquering oneself?

自 勝 者 強 .
self victory one-who powerful

知足 literally means 'know enough' - what might it mean to 'know enough'? How does this relate to wealth?

知 足 者 富 .

know enough one-who wealthy

強行 combines 'strong' with 'act/walk' - suggesting forceful or determined action. What kind of person has 志 (will/ambition)?

強 行 者 有 志 .

strong act one-who have will

Note the complex construction: 不失其所 - 'not lose their place'. What does it mean to keep one's place? How does this relate to endurance?

不 失 其 所 者 久 .

not lose their place one-who endure

The final line presents a fascinating paradox - how can one die (死) yet not perish (不亡)? What kind of 'long life' might this suggest?

死 而 不 亡 者 壽 .

die yet not perish one-who longevity

Chapter 34

This opening line uses 兮 (xi), a classical particle that adds poetic rhythm and emphasis - like saying 'ah!' or 'indeed!'

大 道 汜 兮

great way overflow indeed

Left and right here may suggest 'all directions' or 'everywhere' - a common metaphorical usage in Classical Chinese

其 可 左 右 .

it can left right

恃 is a fascinating character meaning to rely/depend on - notice how all things 'lean on' the Dao

萬 物 恃 之 (以) 生

ten-thousand things depend-on it (by-means-of) live

而 不 辭 .

yet not decline

功 成 遂

merit complete therefore

[而] 不 名 有 .
[yet] not name possess

衣 typically means 'clothes' but here acts as a verb meaning 'to clothe/provide for' -
notice this elegant metaphor

衣 養 萬 物
clothe nourish ten-thousand things

而 不 為 主
yet not act-as master

[故] 常 無 欲 .
[[therefore]] always without desire

可 名 於 小 .
can name as small

歸 (return/revert) is a key concept in Daoism - what might it mean that all things 'return'
to something that doesn't act as their master?

萬 物 歸 焉
ten-thousand things return thereto

而 不 為 主
yet not act-as master

可 名 (於) 大 .
can name (as) great

(是以聖人之能成大.)
(thus-sage's-ability-achieve-greatness)

Notice how this chapter plays with the concept of 大 (great/greatness) - what paradox might it be suggesting about achieving greatness?

[以其不為大.]
[because-not-act-great]

故 能 成 — 大
(therefore) able achieve () great

Chapter 35

This opening line uses 象 (image/symbol/elephant) - a key concept in Chinese philosophy. The 'great image' often refers to the fundamental patterns of the cosmos.

執 大 象
hold great image

天下 is a compound meaning 'all-under-heaven' - the whole world/empire. Notice how 往 (go) creates movement in this static scene.

天 下 往
heaven below go

往 而 不 害
go and not harm

安 平 太 .
peaceful level great

餌 (bait) is an fascinating word choice here - what might it suggest about the nature of music and food?

樂 與 餌 過 客 止
music and bait passing guest stop

Notice how 淡 (bland/plain) is often used positively in Daoist texts, contrary to our usual associations.

道 之 出 (言) 淡 (呵)
way of exit (speak) bland (ah)

其 無 味 .
its without flavor

This begins a powerful triplet structure using parallel grammar. What might 不足 (not-enough) suggest about our normal ways of perceiving?

視 之 不 足 見 .
look it not enough see

聽 之 不 足 聞 .
listen it not enough hear

既 (exhaust/finish) creates an interesting tension with 不足 (not-enough) - consider how this relates to the Dao's inexhaustible nature.

用 之 不 足 既 .
use it not enough exhaust

Chapter 36

This chapter opens with a recurring pattern structure. Notice how '將欲' (about-to want) starts several lines - this is a grammatical structure indicating intention or imminent action.

將 欲 歛 之

about-to want contract it

Notice how each response line begins with '必固' (must surely) - creating a strong rhetorical parallel structure.

必 固 張 之

must surely expand it

將 欲 弱 之

about-to want weaken it

必 固 強 之

must surely strengthen it

將 欲 廢 之

about-to want abolish it

必 固 興 之 .

must surely rise it

將 欲 奪 之

about-to

want

seize

it

必 固 與 之

must

surely

give

it

'微明' (subtle bright) is a fascinating compound - consider how something can be both subtle and bright at the same time. What kind of wisdom might that represent?

是 謂 微 明 .

this

called

subtle

bright

This line presents a profound conclusion about the nature of strength and weakness. Notice how the word order emphasizes 'soft weak' conquering 'hard strong'

柔 弱 勝 剛 強

soft

weak

conquer

hard

strong

An interesting metaphor appears - what might a fish and deep water represent in terms of natural belonging and power?

魚 不 可 脫 於 淵

fish

not

can

escape

from

deep-water

國 之 利 器

state

's

sharp

implement

The chapter ends with a warning about power and its display. Consider why showing 'sharp implements' might be unwise for a state.

不 可 以 示 人 .
not can by-means-of show person

Chapter 37

This opening line establishes a profound paradox about the Dao's relationship with action/non-action (wei/wuwei). Notice how 常 (constant) modifies 無為 (non-action)

道 常 無 為 .
way constant not-have act

The word 而 here acts as a conjunction showing contrast - watch how it connects to the previous line to complete the paradox

而 無 不 為 .
yet not-have not act

Notice how 若能 (if-can) creates a conditional statement - what would happen if rulers could achieve this?

侯 王 若 能 守 之
marquis king if can maintain it

The character 將 here indicates something that will happen in the future - notice how it pairs with 自 (self) to suggest spontaneous action

萬 物 將 自 化
ten-thousand thing will self transform

化 而 欲 作
transform yet desire arise

Notice the use of 以 (by-means-of) here - it's showing how something is accomplished.
What's significant about using 'nameless simplicity' as a tool?

吾 將 鎮 之 以 無 名 之 樸
I will steady it by-means-of not-have name of simplicity

無 名 之 樸
not-have name of simplicity

The particle 夫 here is serving to mark the start of a conclusion - watch how these final lines build to the chapter's ultimate point

夫 亦 將 無 欲
indeed also will not-have desire

不 欲 以 靜
not desire by-means-of stillness

Notice how this final line mirrors the structure about 'ten thousand things' transforming themselves - but now it's about the world ordering itself

天 下 將 自 定 .
heaven below will self settle

Chapter 38

This opening line introduces a fascinating paradox about virtue (德/de). Notice how the first two characters combine - what kind of virtue is being discussed?

上 德 不 德 是 以 有 德
high virtue not virtue this by-means-of have virtue

Compare this with the previous line - what's the key difference between 'high virtue' and 'low virtue'?

下 德 不 失 德 是 以 無 德
low virtue not lose virtue this by-means-of without virtue

無為 (wu-wei) is a key Daoist concept - notice how it's paired with the second half of the line

上 德 無 為 而 無 以 為 .
high virtue without action and without by-means-of action

下 德 為 之 而 有 以 為
low virtue do it and have by-means-of do

Notice how the text moves down a hierarchy: from virtue (德) to benevolence (仁) to righteousness (義) to ritual (禮)

上 仁 為 之 而 無 以 為 .
high benevolence do it and without by-means-of do

上 義 為 之 而 有 以 為 .
high righteousness do it and have by-means-of do

This line presents an interesting image - what happens when ritual is performed but receives no response?

上 禮 為 之 而 莫 之 以 應 .
high ritual do it and none it by-means-of respond

攘臂 (rang bi) literally means 'bare the arms' - what kind of action does this suggest?

則 攘 臂 而 (仍) 之
then bare arms and (still) it

Here begins a sequence showing the degradation from Dao downward - notice the pattern

故 失 道 而 後 德
(therefore) lose way and after virtue

失 德 而 後 仁
lose virtue and after benevolence

失 仁 而 後 義 .
lose benevolence and after righteousness

失 義 而 後 禮
lose righteousness and after ritual

This is a powerful critique of ritual - what does it mean for ritual to be the 'thinning' of loyalty and trust?

夫 禮 者 忠 信 之 薄 .
(now) ritual that-which loyalty trust of thin

而 亂 之 首 .
and chaos of beginning

前識 (qian shi) refers to foreknowledge - why might this be considered merely the 'flower' of the Way?

前 識 者 道 之 華 .
fore knowledge that-which way of flower

而 愚 之 始 .
and foolishness of beginning

大丈夫 (da zhang fu) - 'great person' - what qualities make someone 'great' according to this text?

是 以 大 丈 夫
this by-means-of great measure person

處 其 厚 不 居 其 薄
dwell its thick not reside its thin

處 其 實 不 居 其 華
dwell its solid not reside its flower

故 去 彼 取 此 .
(therefore) reject that take this

Chapter 39

This opening line sets up a historical frame - 'those who obtained/achieved One in ancient times'. The character 昔 (ancient times) immediately tells us we're about to learn from historical examples.

昔 之 得 一 者
ancient-times of obtain One one-who

Notice how the next six lines follow the same grammatical pattern: Subject + 得 + 一 + 以 + Result. This parallel structure is a key feature of Classical Chinese poetry and philosophy.

天 得 一 以 清
heaven obtain One by-means-of clear

地 得 一 以 寧
earth obtain One by-means-of peaceful

神 can refer to spirits/gods/divine forces - it's deliberately ambiguous and encompasses all supernatural forces.

神 得 一 以 靈
spirit obtain One by-means-of efficacious

谷 (valley) is often used metaphorically in Daoist texts. Consider what qualities a valley has - what does it mean for a valley to be 'full'?

谷 得 一 以 盈
valley obtain One by-means-of full

萬 物 得 一 以 生 。

ten-thousand things obtain One by-means-of live

侯王 refers to feudal lords and kings - the ruling class. 貞 has connotations of correctness, authenticity, and integrity.

侯 王 得 一 以 為 天 下 貞

marquis king obtain One by-means-of become heaven below authentic

其 致 之 。

its extreme it

Now we see the opposite scenario - what happens without the One. Notice the parallel structure continues with 將恐 (will fear) followed by negative consequences.

天 無 以 清

heaven without by-means-of clear

將 恐 裂

will fear split

地 無 以 寧

earth without by-means-of peaceful

將 恐 發

will fear burst

神 無 以 靈
spirit without by-means-of efficacious

將 恐 歠
will fear exhaust

谷 無 以 盈
valley without by-means-of full

將 恐 竭
will fear dry-up

萬 物 無 以 生
ten-thousand things without by-means-of live

將 恐 滅
will fear extinguish

Notice how 貴高 (noble-high) parallels the earlier mention of rulers, but now focuses on their status rather than their function.

侯 王 無 以 貴 高
marquis king without by-means-of noble high

將 恐 蹶
will fear stumble

故 (therefore) signals an important conclusion. This passage reveals a fundamental Daoist paradox about the relationship between high and low, noble and humble.

故 貴 以 賤 為 本
(therefore) noble by-means-of humble make root

高 以 下 為 基
high by-means-of low make foundation

The terms 孤寡不穀 were humble self-deprecating terms used by rulers. This line shows how the highest should present themselves as the lowest.

是 以 侯 王 自 謂 孤 寡 不
this by-means-of marquis king self call orphaned widowed not
穀
grain

此 非 以 賤 為 本 (邪)
this not by-means-of humble make root (indeed)

非 乎
not indeed

The final section uses vivid imagery contrasting jade (precious) with stone (common) to reinforce the theme of embracing the humble over the exalted.

故	致	數	輿	無	輿
(therefore)	extreme	count	chariot	without	chariot

不	欲	瑤	瑤	如	玉
not	desire	gleaming	gleaming	like	jade

珞	珞	如	石
plain	plain	like	stone

Chapter 40

This opening line introduces a fascinating concept about movement/change (動) in relation to the Dao. Notice how 者 marks the topic!

反 者 道 之 動 .

return/reverse one-who way 's movement

Similar grammatical structure to the first line. The character 用 has a basic meaning of 'use/function' but carries deeper implications about utility and purpose.

弱 者 道 之 用 .

weak one-who way 's use

Here we see 萬物 (ten-thousand things) - a classical way to refer to 'everything in existence'. The structure 生於 (born-from) is key to understanding this cosmological statement.

天 下 萬 物 生 於 有 .

heaven below ten-thousand things born from existence

A profound philosophical statement about origins. Consider: what does it mean for 'existence' itself to be born from 'non-existence'? Notice how the same characters 生於 are used again.

有 生 於 無 .

existence born from non-existence

Chapter 41

This opening stanza establishes a hierarchy of three types of students/scholars (士). Notice how their reactions differ - what does this tell us about wisdom?

上 士 聞 道 勤 而 行 之
upper scholar hear way diligent and practice it

Notice the repeated use of 若 (like/as-if) creating a sense of uncertainty. The middle scholar's response is neither full acceptance nor rejection.

中 士 聞 道 若 存 若 亡
middle scholar hear way as-if exist as-if gone

The character 笑 (laugh) here carries a sense of mockery or dismissal. What does this tell us about the lowest level of understanding?

下 士 聞 道 大 笑 之
lower scholar hear way great laugh it

This line suggests that if the Dao weren't laughed at by some, it wouldn't be the true Dao. A fascinating paradox!

不 笑 不 足 以 為 道 .
not laugh not sufficient by-means-of become way

故 建 言 有 之 (曰) .
(therefore) establish words have it (say)

What follows is a series of paradoxical descriptions. Notice how 若 (as-if) is used to create seeming contradictions.

明 道 若 昧
bright way as-if dim

進 道 若 退
advance way as-if retreat

夷 道 若 類
smooth way as-if rough

Valley (谷) is empty yet contains - a powerful metaphor in Daoist thought.

上 德 若 谷 .
highest virtue as-if valley

The final line suggests that only the Dao is good at both beginning and completing - a profound observation about the cyclical nature of existence.

夫 唯 道 善 (始) 且 (善) 成
(indeed) only way good (begin) and (good) complete

Chapter 42

This is one of the most famous cosmological passages in Daoism, describing the emergence of existence itself.

道 生 一
way gives-birth-to one

一 生 二
one gives-birth-to two

二 生 三
two gives-birth-to three

Notice how 萬 (ten-thousand) is often used to mean 'all' or 'myriad' in Classical Chinese

三 生 萬 物
three gives-birth-to ten-thousand things

An elegant description of duality - what might 負 (carry-on-back) and 抱 (embrace) suggest about the relationship between yin and yang?

萬 物 負 陰 而 抱 陽
ten-thousand things carry-on-back yin and embrace yang

沖 carries the sense of 'empty' or 'hollow' - how might this relate to harmony?

沖 氣 以 為 和
empty energy by-means-of become harmony

人 之 所 惡
people 's that-which hate

These three terms (孤寡不穀) were humble self-deprecating terms used by rulers - what might this tell us about true leadership?

唯 孤 寡 不 穀
only alone widow not grain

而 王 公 以 (自) 稱 .
yet king duke by-means-of (self) call

故 物
(therefore) things

Notice the parallel structure in these next two lines - a common poetic device in Classical Chinese

或 損 之 而 益
perhaps decrease it and increase

或 益 之 而 損
perhaps increase it and decrease

人 之 所 教 我 亦 教 之

people 's that-which teach I also teach it

強梁 (strong-beam) is often used to describe those who are forcefully aggressive - what might this line suggest about such behavior?

強 梁 者 不 得 其 死

strong beam one not obtain their death

吾 將 以 為 教 父

I will by-means-of make teaching father

Chapter 43

This opening line introduces a fascinating contrast - what could be the 'softest/most yielding thing under heaven'? Keep this imagery in mind...

天 下 之 至 柔

heaven below of most soft

Notice how this line mirrors the structure of the first, but with 'hard' replacing 'soft'. The character 馳騁 gives a sense of galloping/charging - suggesting forceful movement through or against something.

馳 騁 天 下 之 至 堅

gallop charge heaven below of most hard

A cryptic line about nothingness and gaps - what could enter where there is no space? Think about water seeping into stone...

無 有 入 無 間

not-have have enter not-have space

Here 無為 (wu-wei) appears - one of Daoism's key concepts meaning 'non-action' or 'effortless action'. Notice how it's connected to 'benefit' (益).

吾 是 以 知 無 為 之 有 益 .

I this by-means-of know not-have do of have benefit

教 (teach) without 言 (words) - how might one teach without speaking? Think of learning by observation or experience...

不 言 之 教
not speak of teach

無 為 之 益
not-have do of benefit

希 suggests rarity or scarcity - what might be so rare? Why might these concepts be difficult for people to grasp?

天 下 希 及 之 .
heaven below rare reach it

Chapter 44

This opening line sets up a profound comparison using 孰 (which/who), asking us to weigh two important concepts. Notice how 與 (and/with) is setting up comparisons throughout the first several lines.

名 與 身 孰 親

name and body/self which close

Notice how this line follows the exact same grammatical pattern as the first - this parallel structure is a key feature of Classical Chinese poetry.

身 與 貨 孰 多

body/self and goods which more

The third parallel question introduces 得 (gain) and 亡 (lose) - consider how these concepts might relate to the previous lines about possessions and self.

得 與 亡 孰 病

gain and lose which illness

Notice how 必 (must) creates a cause-and-effect relationship between the two parts of this statement.

甚 愛 必 大 費

very love must great expense

多 藏 必 厚 亡

much store must heavy lose

Here's a powerful contrast - 知 (know) paired with 足 (enough). How might this relate to the previous lines about gain and loss?

知 足 不 辱
know enough not shame

知 止 不 殆
know stop not danger

This concluding line uses 可以 (can/able) to introduce a result. Consider how this ties together all the previous concepts about knowing limits and avoiding excess.

可 以 長 久
can by-means-of long lasting

Chapter 45

This opening line sets up a profound paradox about completion and incompleteness. The character 若 (if/as-if) creates metaphorical comparisons throughout this chapter.

大 成 若 缺

great completion as-if lacking

Note how 其 (its) refers back to the subject of the previous line - a common Classical Chinese grammatical pattern.

其 用 不 弊 。

its use not worn-out

盅 literally means 'empty vessel' - consider how this relates to usefulness and fullness.

大 盈 若 (盅)

great full as-if (empty-vessel)

其 用 不 窮 。

its use not exhausted

Notice how the next several lines follow the same grammatical pattern: 大 X 若 Y (great X as-if Y). What might this repetition emphasize?

大 直 若 屈 。

great straight as-if bent

大 巧 若 拙 .

great skilled as-if clumsy

辯 refers to eloquence in speech - consider how this relates to the previous paradoxes.

大 辯 若 訥 .

great eloquent as-if stuttering

The next two lines shift to discussing opposing forces. Notice how 勝 (overcome) is used.

躁 勝 寒 .

restless overcome cold

靜 勝 熱

still overcome heat

The final line introduces 清靜 (pure-stillness) as a solution. Consider how this relates to all the paradoxes presented before. What makes something 正 (correct/proper)?

清 靜 為 天 下 正 .

pure still become heaven below proper

Chapter 46

This opening line sets up a contrast between two states of the world - when there is 道 (Way) and when there isn't. Watch how the outcomes differ!

天 下 有 道

heaven below have way

An fascinating image! Notice how 卻 (to send back/return) combines with 走馬 (running horses) and 糞 (manure) - what might using horses for fertilizer rather than war suggest about a society?

卻 走 馬 以 糞

return run horse by-means-of manure

天 下 無 道

heaven below not-have way

Compare this to the previous horse imagery - now where are the horses and what kind are they?

戎 馬 生 於 郊 .

military horse born at outskirts

This parenthetical line introduces the first of three parallel statements about 莫大於 (nothing greater than). Notice how 可欲 combines 'possible' and 'desire'

(罪 莫 大 於 可 欲)

(crime none greater than can desire)

禍 莫 大 於 不 知 足

disaster none greater than not know enough

咎 莫 大 於 欲 得

blame none greater than desire obtain

A beautiful conclusion that plays with the word 足 (enough). Notice how it appears three times - as a verb 'to be enough', as a noun 'what is enough', and again as 'enough'. The repetition creates a sense of completeness.

故 知 足 之 足 常 足 矣 .

therefore know enough of enough always enough indeed

Chapter 47

This opening line sets up a fascinating paradox - how can one know the world without leaving home? The grammar here is simple negation (不) + verb (出) + object (戶).

不 出 戶
not exit door

Note how [以] functions here - it indicates means/method. The structure is: [by-means-of] + verb + object. This creates a powerful connection between the first and second lines.

[以] 知 天 下
[by-means-of] know heaven below

闚 is a very specific word for 'peek through a small opening' - the precision of Classical Chinese can be remarkable!

不 闚 牖
not peek window

[以] (知) 天 道
[by-means-of] (know) heaven way

彌 is an intensifier meaning 'increasingly' or 'more and more' - watch how it creates a building sense in these parallel lines.

其 出 彌 遠
its going-out increasingly far

其 知 彌 少
its knowing increasingly little

是以 ('therefore') often signals an important conclusion or lesson is coming. 聖人 (sage) is a key concept in Daoist philosophy - one who has achieved great wisdom.

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

The final three lines follow a powerful parallel structure. Each begins with 不 (not) followed by a verb, 而 (and/yet), and a result. Can you see how this builds to the chapter's conclusion?

不 行 而 知
not travel yet know

不 見 而 名
not see yet name

不 為 而 成
not do yet accomplish

Chapter 48

This opening line establishes a profound contrast between academic learning and following the Dao. Notice how '者' marks the subject - 'one who...'

為 學 (者) 日 益
do study (one-who) day increase

A direct parallel structure to the first line, but with 'dao' replacing 'study' - watch how the meaning shifts with just one character changed

為 道 (者) 日 損
do way (one-who) day decrease

'Again and again' is emphasized through repetition of 損 - what keeps decreasing?

損 之 又 損
decrease it again decrease

Note how 以 functions here - 'by means of' reaching (至) something

以 至 於 無 為 .
by-means-of reach at without doing

A famous paradox! Look at how 而 connects the two phrases - what happens when you do nothing?

無 為 而 無 不 為 .
without doing yet without not doing

常 here suggests a general principle - what's the relationship between governing and 'no affairs'?

取 天 下 常 以 無 事
take heaven below always by-means-of without affairs

及 其 有 事 .
reach its have affairs

This final line completes the thought - consider how 不足 ('not enough') relates to the previous statements about doing and not-doing

不 足 以 取 天 下
not enough by-means-of take heaven below

Chapter 49

This opening line introduces a profound concept about the sage's mind - notice how 無常 (without-constant) relates to adaptability

聖 人 無 常 心
sage person without constant heart-mind

A key line showing how the sage relates to others - watch how 為 (make/become) creates a relationship between the two instances of 心 (heart-mind)

以 百 姓 心 為 心
by-means-of hundred surnames heart-mind make heart-mind

善 者 吾 善 之
good one-who I good them

Notice the parallel structure with the previous line - a common poetic device in Classical Chinese

不 善 者 吾 亦 善 之
not good one-who I also good them

This short line carries deep meaning - 德 (virtue/power) is paired with 善 (good)

德 善 .
virtue good

信 者 吾 信 之
trust one-who I trust them

不 信 者 吾 亦 信 之
not trust one-who I also trust them

德 信 .
virtue trust

歛歛 (xi xi) is an interesting onomatopoeia suggesting gathering or drawing in - think about what this implies about the sage's presence

聖 人 在 天 下 歛 歛
sage person at heaven below gather gather

渾 suggests a mixing or muddling - consider why the sage would 'muddle' their heart-mind for all under heaven

[焉] 為 天 下 渾 其 心
[thereby] make heaven below muddle their heart-mind

百 姓 皆 注 其 耳 目
hundred surnames all focus their ears eyes

The final line uses 孩 (child/infant) - what might it mean for a sage to treat everyone as children?

聖 人 皆 孩 之
sage person all child them

Chapter 50

This opening line sets up a powerful contrast using directional verbs - 出 (exit) and 入 (enter) paired with life and death.

出 生 入 死
exit life enter death

Notice the grammar pattern 'X 之 徒' meaning 'followers/adherents of X' - a common Classical Chinese construction

生 之 徒 十 有 三
life of followers ten have three

死 之 徒 十 有 三
death of followers ten have three

Note how 動 (movement) is contrasted with 地 (ground/place) - suggesting how life's activity leads to death's domain

人 之 生 動 之 死 地
person of life move of death ground

亦 十 有 三
also ten have three

This rhetorical question pattern '夫何故' is common in philosophical texts to prompt reflection

(夫 何 故 .

(that what reason

以 其 生 生 之 厚 .

by-means-of their life live of thick

蓋聞 (roughly 'I have heard that...') is a common way to introduce wisdom or teaching in Classical texts

蓋 聞 善 攝 生 者

indeed hear good manage life one-who

兕 refers to a rhinoceros - an ancient symbol of dangerous wild forces

(陵) 行 不 遇 兕 虎

(travel) walk not meet rhinoceros tiger

入 軍 不 被 甲 兵

enter army not suffer armor weapon

Notice the parallel structure in these three lines about the rhinoceros, tiger, and weapons - emphasizing their powerlessness

兕 無 所 投 其 角

rhinoceros not-have place throw its horn

虎 無 所 措 其 爪

tiger not-have place place its claw

兵 無 所 容 其 刃
weapon not-have place contain its blade

(夫 何 故 .
(that what reason

The conclusion reveals why one who properly manages life is protected - they have no 'death ground' (無死地) - consider what this might mean metaphorically

以 其 無 死 地
by-means-of their not-have death ground

Chapter 51

This opening line establishes a powerful relationship between Dao and creation. Notice how '之' is used as an object pronoun throughout this chapter - it refers back to '萬物' (ten-thousand things/all things).

道 生 之

way give-birth it

The character '畜' (xu4) originally showed animals in an enclosure - think about nurturing, raising, fostering.

德 畜 之

virtue nurture it

物 形 之

thing shape it

'勢' refers to the natural tendency or inherent power of things - like water flowing downhill.

勢 成 之

momentum complete it

是 以 萬 物

this by-means-of ten-thousand things

Notice the elegant negative construction '莫不' (none-not) - what might this double negative suggest?

莫 不 尊 道 而 貴 德
none not revere way and value virtue

道 之 尊 .
way of reverence

德 之 貴 .
virtue of value

'夫' here serves as an emphatic particle - it draws attention to what follows.

夫 莫 之 命 .
(indeed) none it command

'自然' is a key concept in Daoism - literally 'self-so' - meaning naturally occurring without forced effort.

而 常 自 然
yet constant self so

故 道 生 之 德 畜 之
(therefore) way give-birth it virtue nurture it

Notice how the next several lines create a powerful rhythm through parallel structure - each ending with '之'.

長 之 育 之
grow it raise it

'亭' suggests maturation while '毒' here means to perfect or bring to fruition - not the modern meaning of poison!

亭 之 毒 之
mature it perfect it

養 之 覆 之
nourish it protect it

This begins a series of paradoxical statements characteristic of Daoist thought. Notice the parallel structure with '而不' (and-not).

生 而 不 有 .
give-birth and not possess

為 而 不 恃 .
act and not rely-on

長 而 不 宰
grow and not control

'玄德' (dark virtue) is a profound concept in Daoism - what might 'dark' suggest about the nature of true virtue?

是 謂 玄 德
this called dark virtue

Chapter 52

This opening line establishes a cosmic scope - 天下 'all-under-heaven' is a term for the world/empire/everything. The concept of 'beginning' (始) is crucial in Daoist thought.

天 下 有 始

heaven below have beginning

A profound statement connecting the cosmic beginning to motherhood. Note how 以為 functions to indicate 'serves-as' or 'becomes'.

以 為 天 下 母

by-means-of become heaven below mother

既 得 其 母

already obtain its mother

Notice how 以 here introduces a result - 'thereby' or 'thus'. This grammatical pattern of cause-effect is common in Classical Chinese.

以 知 其 子

by-means-of know its child

既 知 其 子

already know its child

復 has a sense of 'returning' - consider what it means to 'return to guarding the mother' after knowing the child.

復 守 其 母
return guard its mother

身 'body/self' appears frequently in this chapter - notice how it relates to mortality and preservation.

沒 身 不 殆 .
sink body not danger

兌 refers to openings/holes - think about what 'blocking holes' and 'closing doors' might metaphorically represent.

塞 其 兌 閉 其 門
block its opening close its door

終 身 不 勤
end body not toil

開 其 兌 濟 其 事
open its opening aid its affairs

終 身 不 救 .
end body not save

This line presents an interesting paradox - how can seeing small things be called 'bright/clear'? Consider what true clarity of vision might mean.

見 小 曰 明
see small say bright

Another paradox - maintaining softness is called strength. This is a key Daoist principle about the power of yielding.

守 柔 曰 強
guard soft say strong

用 其 光 復 歸 其 明
use its light return return its brightness

無 遺 身 殃
without leave body calamity

習常 literally means 'practice constant' - consider how this final line connects to the idea of returning to origins discussed at the chapter's beginning.

是 謂 習 常
this called practice constant

Chapter 53

This opening line uses '!' markers to set apart an important declaration. The character 介 (介然) suggests a state of being cautious or modest.

· 使 我 介 然 有 知 ·
cause I cautious thus have know

大道 (Great Way) is a key concept in Daoism - notice how it's positioned with 行 (walk/practice) and 於 (in/at/to).

行 於 大 道
walk in great way

唯 often marks what follows as the only thing that matters - what might it mean if the only thing to fear is 逸 (straying/deviating)?

唯 逸 是 畏
only stray this fear

夷 means level/peaceful - consider how this describes the Great Way.

大 道 甚 夷 ·
great way very level

徑 means path/shortcut - notice the contrast between the 'great way' and what people prefer.

而 民 好 徑 ·
but people prefer shortcut

朝 refers to the court/government. 除 means to clear/remove - what might a 'very cleared' court suggest?

朝 甚 除 .
court very cleared

蕪 means overgrown/neglected - notice the contrast with the previous line about the court.

田 甚 蕪 .
field very overgrown

倉 甚 虛
granary very empty

文綵 refers to decorated/ornate clothing - consider what this might suggest about priorities.

服 文 綵
wear decorated colored

帶 利 劍
wear sharp sword

厭 飲 食 .
satiated drink food

Notice how 有餘 (have excess) connects to the earlier mentions of empty granaries.

財 貨 有 餘
wealth goods have excess

盜夸 combines 'thief' and 'boast' - what might this say about flaunting wealth?

是 謂 盜 夸
this called thief boast

The final line ends with 哉, an emphatic particle expressing strong emotion. 非 negates what precedes it.

非 道 也 哉
not way indeed ah

Chapter 54

This opening line uses a common Classical Chinese construction: 善 X 者 meaning 'one who is good at X'

善 建 者 不 拔

good-at build one-who not uproot

善 抱 者 不 脫

good-at embrace one-who not slip-away

This line speaks to continuing ancestral traditions - notice how 以 here works with the negative 不 to create continuous action

子 孫 以 祭 祀 不 輟

child grandchild by-means-of sacrifice worship not cease

Notice the parallel structure beginning here - 修之 followed by different scopes (身,家,鄉,國,天下). This is a common rhetorical device in Classical Chinese.

修 之 — 身 其 德 乃 (真)

cultivate it body/self its virtue then (true)

修 之 — 家 其 德 乃 餘

cultivate it family its virtue then overflow

修 之 — 鄉 其 德 乃 長
cultivate it village its virtue then grow

修 之 — 國 其 德 乃 豐
cultivate it country its virtue then abundant

天下 literally means 'under heaven' but refers to the whole world/empire - notice how the progression moves from individual to universal

修 之 — 天 下 其 德 乃 普
cultivate it heaven below its virtue then universal

故 signals a conclusion or result. Notice how 以 is used repeatedly to structure comparisons

(故) 以 身 觀 身
(therefore) by-means-of body/self observe body/self

以 家 觀 家
by-means-of family observe family

以 鄉 觀 鄉
by-means-of village observe village

以 國 觀 國
by-means-of country observe country

以 天 下 觀 天 下

by-means-of heaven below observe heaven below

哉 is a final particle expressing wonderment/emphasis. Notice how 然 (thus/so) refers back to everything previously stated

吾 何 以 知 天 下 然 哉

I how by-means-of know heaven below so !

A powerful ending - 此 'this' refers to everything that came before. What do you think the text is saying about how we can understand the world?

以 此

by-means-of this

Chapter 55

This opening line sets up a comparison - watch for who/what is being compared to what...

含 德 之 厚 [者]
hold virtue of thick [one-who]

Here's our answer - a comparison to an infant. Why would this be significant?

比 於 赤 子 .
compare to red child

Notice how this begins a series of negative statements - things that don't happen. What might this tell us about the nature of an infant?

蜂 蠆 虺 蛇 不 螫
bee scorpion viper snake not sting

猛 獸 不 據
fierce beast not seize

攫 鳥 不 搏
grabbing bird not clutch

Notice the contrast between physical weakness and strength here - a fascinating paradox!

骨 弱 筋 柔 而 握 固 .

bone weak sinew soft yet grip firm

This line discusses reproduction with deliberately archaic terms - 牝牡 (pin/mu) are ancient words for female/male animals

未 知 牝 牡 之 合 而 (媾) 作

not-yet know female male of joining yet (aroused) arise

精 之 至 也

essence of ultimate indeed

Another paradox - constant crying without becoming hoarse. What might this suggest about natural harmony?

終 日 號 而 不 嗄

whole day cry yet not hoarse

和 之 至 也

harmony of ultimate indeed

Now we enter a series of definitions. Notice how 'knowing' (知) leads to understanding different concepts.

知 和 曰 常

know harmony called constant

知 常 曰 明

know constant called bright

益 生 曰 祥 .

increase life called auspicious

This line introduces a warning about forcing or controlling things - notice the contrast with the infant's natural state described earlier

心 使 氣 曰 強

heart-mind direct energy called strong

物 壯 則 老

thing strong then old

謂 之 不 道 .

call it not way

The final warning about what happens when one goes against the natural way

不 道 早 已

not way early already

Chapter 56

This opening couplet is one of the most famous paradoxes in the Dao De Jing. Notice how it creates a logical puzzle - if those who know don't speak, how can anyone speak of knowing?

知 者 不 言 .

know one-who not speak

言 者 不 知 .

speak one-who not know

The next several lines use very concrete, physical actions as metaphors. 塞/閉 (block/close) paired with 兌/門 (opening/door) creates parallel structure common in Classical Chinese poetry.

塞 其 兌 閉 其 門

block its opening close its door

挫 其 銳

blunt its sharpness

解 其 紛

unravel its confusion

光 (light/brightness) and 塵 (dust) form an interesting contrast. What might it mean to 'harmonize one's light' or 'unite with dust'?

和 其 光

harmonize

its

light

同 其 塵

unite-with

its

dust

玄同 (mysterious-unity) is a key concept in Daoism. 玄 literally means 'dark/black' but takes on mystical connotations.

是 謂 玄 同 .

this

called

mysterious

unity

The next section follows a repeated grammatical pattern: 不可得而 X. This construction means something is 'impossible to be X-ed'. Watch how it builds through opposites.

故 不 可 得 而 親 .

(therefore)

not

can

obtain

and

close

不 可 得 而 疏 .

not

can

obtain

and

distant

不 可 得 而 利

not

can

obtain

and

benefit

不 可 得 而 害

not

can

obtain

and

harm

不 可 得 而 貴
not can obtain and value

不 可 得 而 賤
not can obtain and despise

The final line provides the conclusion. Notice how 天下 (under-heaven) is a common way to refer to 'the world' or 'all under heaven'. How does this relate to all the previous lines about being unable to be valued or despised?

故 為 天 下 貴 .
(therefore) become heaven under precious

Chapter 57

This opening sequence establishes a parallel structure comparing three approaches to ruling. Notice how '以' (by-means-of) introduces each method.

以 正 治 國
by-means-of proper govern state

以 奇 用 兵
by-means-of strange use military

以 無 事 取 天 下
by-means-of without affairs take heaven below

This is a rhetorical question pattern common in Classical Chinese. '何以' together means 'how' or 'by what means'

吾 何 以 知 其 然 哉
I what by-means-of know it so indeed

以 此
by-means-of this

Notice how the pattern '滋' (increasingly) repeats in the following lines, showing escalating negative consequences

天 下 多 忌 諱

heaven below many taboo avoid

而 民 彌 貧 .

yet people increasingly poor

民 多 利 器

people many sharp tools

[而] 國 家 滋 昏

[yet] state family increasingly dark

人 多 (知) 巧

people many (knowledge) clever

[而] 奇 物 滋 起

[yet] strange things increasingly arise

法 (物) 滋 (章)

law (things) increasingly (manifest)

盜 賊 多 有

thief bandit many exist

Here begins the sage's response, structured in four parallel statements. Notice how each line follows the pattern: 我 (I) + negative + 而 (yet) + 民 (people) + 自 (self) + result

故 聖 人 云
(therefore) sage person say

我 無 為 而 民 自 化
I without action yet people self transform

我 好 靜 而 民 自 正
I love stillness yet people self proper

我 無 事 而 民 自 富
I without affairs yet people self rich

我 無 欲 而 民 自 樸 .
I without desire yet people self simple

Chapter 58

This opening stanza sets up a fascinating contrast using repetition. Notice how each line starts with 其 (their/its) followed by either 政 (government) or 民 (people)

其 政 悶 悶

their government dull dull

其 民 淳 淳

their people pure pure

其 政 察 察

their government examine examine

其 民 缺 缺

their people lacking lacking

Notice how 兮 is a classical particle that adds emphasis or exclamation. This line introduces a profound observation about fortune/misfortune.

禍 兮 福 之 所 倚 .

misfortune ah fortune of place lean-upon

福 兮 禍 之 所 伏

fortune ah misfortune of place hide

孰 is an interrogative word meaning 'who' or 'what' - this line poses a philosophical question

孰 知 其 極
who know its limit

其 無 正 .
its not-have straight

Notice how 復 (return/again) is used to show transformation - one state becoming another

正 復 為 奇
straight return become strange

善 復 為 妖
good return become evil

人 之 迷 .
person of confused

其 日 固 久
its day indeed long

是以 is a common classical Chinese conjunction meaning 'therefore' or 'thus'

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

The final stanzas present four parallel constructions, each describing the sage's balanced way

方	而	不	割
square	but	not	cut

廉	而	不	剡
sharp	but	not	pierce

直	而	不	肆
straight	but	not	unrestrained

光	而	不	耀
bright	but	not	dazzle

Chapter 59

This opening line sets up a contrast between managing human affairs (治人) and dealing with heaven/nature (事天) - a common philosophical pairing in Chinese thought.

治 人 事 天

govern person serve heaven

莫若 is a common Classical Chinese construction meaning 'nothing compares to' or 'nothing is better than'. Here we're introduced to a key concept 嗇 (frugality/conservation).

莫 若 嗇

none like frugal

(夫 唯 嗇

indeed only frugal

服 typically means 'to submit/follow' but here has the sense of 'mastering' or 'achieving' early

是 謂 早 服

this called early submit

Note how 重 (heavy/repeated) is used with 積 (accumulate) to emphasize the gradual building up of virtue

早 服 謂 之 重 積 德

early submit called it repeated accumulate virtue

重 積 德

repeated accumulate virtue

克 here carries the sense of 'overcome/master' - what happens when virtue is accumulated?

則 無 不 克 .

then none not overcome

無 不 克

none not overcome

則 莫 知 其 極

then none know its limit

莫 知 其 極

none know its limit

有國 literally means 'to have a state' but implies ruling/managing a state

可 以 有 國

can by-means-of have state

母 (mother) is used metaphorically here - what might it mean to be the 'mother' of a state?

有 國 之 母

have state of mother

可 以 長 久
can by-means-of long lasting

Notice the imagery in 根 (root) and 柢 (base) - what kind of metaphor is being built?

是 謂 深 根 固 柢
this called deep root firm base

This final line brings together several key concepts - 長 (long), 生 (life), 久 (lasting), 視 (see/perspective) - connecting them to the 道 (Way)

長 生 久 視 之 道 . .
long life lasting see of way

Chapter 60

This opening line uses a powerful metaphor comparing governing a large state to cooking small fish - suggesting both require a delicate touch!

治 大 國 若 烹 小 鮮
govern big state like cook small fish

Notice how 以 (by-means-of) connects 道 (way) to the action - a common Classical Chinese grammatical pattern showing how something is accomplished

以 道 莅 天 下
by-means-of way oversee heaven below

Here 其 is being used as a possessive pronoun - whose ghosts? The state's ghosts!

其 鬼 不 神
its ghost not spirit

非 其 鬼 不 神 .
not-that its ghost not spirit

Notice how 傷 (harm/injure) is used repeatedly in the following lines - what might this repetition emphasize?

其 神 不 傷 人 .
its spirit not harm person

非 其 神 不 傷 人 .
not-that its spirit not harm person

聖 人 亦 不 傷 人 .
sage person also not harm person

夫 often introduces an important conclusion or summary - pay attention to what follows!

夫 兩 不 相 傷
thus both not mutual harm

The final line uses 焉 (here/therein) - a common Classical Chinese ending particle that often signals a conclusion

故 德 交 歸 焉
(therefore) virtue exchange return therein

Chapter 61

This opening line uses a water metaphor - 'flowing downward' - a common Daoist image for humility and natural action

大 國 者 下 流 .
great state one-who down flow

Notice how 之 marks possession - 'the meeting point OF all-under-heaven'

天 下 之 交 .
heaven below 's intersection

An interesting metaphor comparing the great state to the female principle

天 下 之 牝 .
heaven below 's female

A profound observation about the power of stillness/quietude - what might this tell us about leadership?

牝 常 以 靜 勝 牡
female always by-means-of stillness overcome male

以 靜 為 下 .
by-means-of stillness make down

故 signals a conclusion or result - what follows explains the consequence of the previous principles

故 大 國 以 下 小 國
therefore great state by-means-of lower small state

則 取 小 國
then acquire small state

小 國 以 下 大 國
small state by-means-of lower great state

則 取 [於] 大 國
then acquire [from] great state

Notice how 或 (some) creates parallel structure in these two lines about lowering oneself

故 或 下 以 取 .
therefore some lower by-means-of acquire

或 下 而 取
some lower and acquire

畜 (nurture/keep) gives a different connotation than simply ruling - what might this suggest about proper governance?

大 國 不 過 欲 兼 畜 人
great state not exceed desire unite nurture people

小 國 不 過 欲 入 事 人 .
small state not exceed desire enter serve people

夫 兩 者 各 得 [其] 所 欲 .
thus both ones each obtain [their] that-which desire

This final line serves as a summary principle - how does it relate to the water metaphor at the start?

大 者 宜 為 下
great one proper make below

Chapter 62

This opening line establishes the Dao's relationship to all things. Notice how '者' marks a topic, and '之' shows possession.

道 者 萬 物 之 奧 .
way one-who ten-thousand things 's mystery

Notice the parallel structure with the previous line - both end with '之' possession marker.

善 人 之 寶 .
good person 's treasure

This line creates a contrast with the previous one. Notice how '所' is working with '保' - this is a common grammatical pattern in Classical Chinese.

不 善 人 之 所 保 .
not good person 's that-which protect

'以' is a key word in Classical Chinese showing means/method. Think about what it means to 'market' words.

美 言 可 以 市 .
beautiful words can by-means-of market

尊 行 可 以 加 人
honorable conduct can by-means-of add-to person

人 之 不 善 。

person 's not good

This is a rhetorical question construction. '何...有' forms the question frame.

何 棄 之 有 。

what abandon it have

'故' signals a conclusion or result - watch for this pattern in Classical Chinese.

故 立 天 子

therefore establish heaven son

置 三 公 。

place three duke

'拱璧' refers to the most precious jade disk held with both hands - a symbol of highest value in ancient China.

雖 有 拱 璧 以 先 駟 馬

although have hold-in-hands jade-disk by-means-of lead four-horse horse

不 如 坐 進 此 道 。

not like sit advance this way

This complex question structure uses '所以' (reason why) and '者' (topic marker) together. Can you see how it's asking about why the ancients valued this?

古 之 所 以 貴 此 道 者 何 .
ancient 's that-which by-means-of value this way one-who what

不 曰
not say

以 求 得
by-means-of seek obtain

有 罪 以 免 邪 (◯)
have guilt by-means-of avoid wrong

This final line brings us full circle to why the Dao is valued. Notice how '故' connects this conclusion to all that came before.

故 為 天 下 貴
therefore be heaven below precious

Chapter 63

This opening line plays with the famous paradox of wuwei (non-action). Notice how 為 appears twice, creating a profound wordplay.

· 為 無 為 ·
do/act not-have do/act

This line parallels the structure above, using 事 (affairs/matters) instead of 為 (action)

事 無 事 ·
handle not-have handle

Completing the parallel structure trilogy, now with 味 (taste/flavor). Consider how these three lines work together...

味 無 味
taste not-have taste

These four characters form two contrasting pairs. In Classical Chinese, contrast often creates meaning!

大 小 多 少
big small many few

An intriguing statement about responding to grievances. Notice how 德 (virtue/power) is positioned at the end.

報 怨 以 德 ·
repay grievance by-means-of virtue

This line introduces a key theme about difficulty and ease. 圖 literally means 'plan' but implies attempting or undertaking.

圖 難 於 其 易
plan difficult at its easy

Parallel structure to the previous line, but now contrasting 大 (big) with 細 (small/fine).

為 大 於 其 細 .
do big at its fine

Notice how 天下 (under-heaven = the world) appears at the start. This signals a universal truth is being stated.

天 下 難 事 必 作 於 易
heaven under difficult matter must arise at easy

A perfect parallel to the previous line, reinforcing the teaching through repetition and structure.

天 下 大 事 必 作 於 細 .
heaven under big matter must arise at fine

Here we meet the 聖人 (sage) - a key figure in Daoist texts. Watch how they approach greatness...

是 以 聖 人 終 不 為 大
this by-means-of sage person end not do big

Notice the beautiful paradox here - by not doing the great, they achieve the great!

故 能 成 其 大

(therefore) can complete their great

A practical wisdom about promises - 諾 is a formal word for promise/agreement.

夫 輕 諾 必 寡 信

one-who light promise must few trust

多 易 必 多 難 .

many easy must many difficult

The sage returns! Notice how they treat difficulty (難) - compare this with the chapter's opening.

是 以 聖 人 猶 難 之 .

this by-means-of sage person still difficult it

The final line brings closure with 矣, a classical particle indicating completion/finality. How does this connect to the opening?

故 終 無 難 矣 .

(therefore) end not-have difficult indeed

Chapter 64

Notice how this chapter begins with periods - a common marker for important statements in Classical Chinese texts

其 安 易 持 .
its peaceful easy maintain

'兆' is a fascinating character - it originally meant 'crack patterns in oracle bones' and came to mean 'signs/omens'

其 未 兆 易 謀
its not-yet show-signs easy plan

其 脆 易 泮
its fragile easy dissolve

其 微 易 散
its tiny easy scatter

Notice the pattern of 'its X easy Y' in the previous lines - what might this tell us about taking early action?

為 之 於 未 有
act it at not-yet exist

治 之 於 未 亂

govern it at not-yet chaos

'合抱' is a lovely compound meaning 'arms joined in embrace' - used to measure the girth of large trees

合 抱 之 木 生 於 毫 末

join embrace of tree grow from tiny tip

九 層 之 臺 起 於 累 土

nine story of tower rise from pile earth

This line has become one of the most famous Chinese proverbs about journeys and beginnings

千 里 之 行 始 於 足 下 .

thousand li of journey begin at foot below

為 者 敗 之

act one-who fail it

執 者 失 之

grasp one-who lose it

'聖人' (sage) appears frequently in Daoist texts - notice how their behavior is often described by what they do NOT do

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

無 為 故 無 敗 .
without action therefore without fail

無 執 故 無 失 .
without grasp therefore without lose

幾 here means 'almost' - think about the timing suggested in this observation about people's endeavors

民 之 從 事 常 於 幾 成 而 敗
people of follow affair often at almost complete and fail
之 .
it

慎 終 如 始
careful end like begin

則 無 敗 事 .
then without fail affair

是 以 聖 人
this by-means-of sage person

This paradoxical statement about 'desiring non-desire' is a key concept in Daoism

欲 不 欲

desire not desire

不 貴 難 得 之 貨

not value difficult obtain of goods

Another paradox - 'learning non-learning'. What might this mean in context of the previous statements?

學 不 學 .

learn not learn

復 眾 人 之 所 過 .

return many person of place pass

以 輔 萬 物 之 自 然

by-means-of assist ten-thousand thing of self so

而 不 敢 為 .

and not dare act

Chapter 65

The opening line sets up a contrast between ancient and modern approaches to governing through the Dao. Notice how '之' marks possession and '者' marks the doer of an action.

古 之 善 為 道 者

ancient of good-at act-as way one-who

Note how '非' negates the entire phrase that follows. '以' introduces the means/method.

非 以 明 民 .

not by-means-of enlighten people

將 here indicates intention or purpose - what was the ancient sage's real aim?

將 以 愚 之 .

will by-means-of simple them

民 之 難 治 .

people of difficult govern

其 refers back to 民 (the people). Notice how (知) is used repeatedly in following lines - what role does knowledge play in governance?

以 其 (知) 多 .

by-means-of their (knowledge) much

故 以 (知) 治 國
therefore by-means-of (knowledge) govern state

國 之 賊 .
state of thief

不 以 (知) 治 國
not by-means-of (knowledge) govern state

國 之 福 .
state of blessing

稽式 literally means 'to examine patterns/models' - what might this tell us about the 'two things' (兩者) being discussed?

知 此 兩 者 亦 稽 式 .
know these two things also examine pattern

常 知 稽 式
always know examine pattern

玄 refers to something profound and mysterious - what qualities might 玄德 (profound virtue) have?

是 謂 玄 德
this called profound virtue

玄 德 深 矣 遠 矣
profound virtue deep indeed far indeed

與 物 反 矣
with things reverse indeed

The final line suggests a culmination - what might 大順 (great harmony) have to do with the previous discussion of knowledge and governance?

—— — 乃 至 大 順
then arrive great harmony

Chapter 66

This opening line uses a powerful metaphor of rivers and seas - notice how it builds on imagery familiar to anyone in ancient China

江 海 所 以 能 為 百 谷 王
river sea that-which by-means-of able become hundred valley king
者
one-who

Notice the character 下 (down/below) - it will become a key theme throughout this chapter

以 其 善 下 之 .
by-means-of its good-at lower it

故 能 為 百 谷 王
(therefore) able become hundred valley king

[聖人] (sage) is a key concept in Daoism - someone who has achieved harmony with the Dao

是 以 [聖 人]
this by-means-of [sage person]

Notice how 上 (raise/above) is paired with 民 (people) - consider what this relationship implies

欲 上 民 .

desire raise people

必 以 言 下 之

must by-means-of words lower them

欲 先 民 .

desire lead people

必 以 身 後 之

must by-means-of body/self behind them

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

Notice the elegant parallel structure in these next few lines, and how 重 (burden) relates to the theme of being 'above'

處 上 而 民 不 重 .

dwell above yet people not burden

處 前 而 民 不 害 .

dwell front yet people not harm

樂 can mean both 'joy' and 'willing' - which meaning fits better with 推 (push forward)?

是 以 天 下 樂 推 而 不 厭
this by-means-of heaven below joy/willing push-forward yet not tire

.

以 其 不 爭 .
by-means-of their not compete

This final line brings everything together - what happens when one doesn't compete?

故 天 下 莫 能 與 之 爭
(therefore) heaven below none able with them compete

Chapter 67

This opening line sets up an interesting paradox about size/greatness. Notice how 天下 (heaven-below) is the classical way to say 'all under heaven' or 'the world'

天 下 皆 謂 我 — 大
heaven below all say I great

肖 (xiao) is a fascinating character meaning 'resemblance/similar' - but with 不 (not) it creates a paradox about unlikeness

似 不 肖
seem not resemble

夫 唯 (不 肖) 故 [能] (大) .
indeed only (not-resemble) therefore [can] (great)

若 肖 .
if resemble

Notice how 矣 is a classical particle indicating completion of action

久 矣 其 細 也
long-time already its small indeed

Here begins the famous 'Three Treasures' (三寶) section

夫 我 有 三 寶

indeed I have three treasure

持 而 保 之 .

hold and protect them

一 曰 慈 .

one called compassion

二 曰 儉

two called frugality

Note how 不敢為天下先 (not-dare-be-heaven-below-first) is a complete concept meaning 'not daring to be first in the world'

三 曰 不 敢 為 天 下 先

three called not dare be heaven below first

慈 故 能 勇

compassion therefore can brave

儉 故 能 廣

frugality therefore can broad

不 敢 為 天 下 先
not dare be heaven below first

器 (vessel) is often used metaphorically in Daoist texts to represent capability or potential

故 能 成 器 長 .
therefore can become vessel leader

且 (moreover) here introduces a contrasting situation

今 舍 慈 且 勇 .
now abandon compassion moreover brave

舍 儉 且 廣
abandon frugality moreover broad

舍 後 且 先
abandon behind moreover first

死 矣
die already

Note how 以 (by-means-of) appears multiple times in this final section, showing method or instrument

夫 慈 以 戰 則 勝
indeed compassion by-means-of fight then victory

以 守 則 固

by-means-of defend then firm

天 將 救 之

heaven will save them

以 慈 衛 之

by-means-of compassion guard them

Chapter 68

This opening line sets up a pattern using '善為 X 者' (one who is good at being X) - notice how each line starts similarly but builds different ideas

善 為 士 者 不 武 .
good act-as scholar one-who not martial

Notice how 戰 (battle/war) pairs with 怒 (anger) - what might this tell us about the Daoist view of conflict?

善 戰 者 不 怒 .
good battle one-who not anger

This line ends without punctuation, creating a sense of incompleteness - what might be missing after 與 (engage/participate)?

善 勝 敵 者 不 與
good victory enemy one-who not engage

A fascinating paradox emerges here - how can 'being below' (為之下) relate to 'using people' (用人)?

善 用 人 者 為 之 下
good use person one-who act-as it below

是謂 (this-is-called) introduces three parallel statements. Notice how each describes a virtue through negation or paradox

是 謂 不 爭 之 德
this called not compete of virtue

是 謂 用 人 之 力
this called use person of strength

配天 (matching heaven) appears with 古 (ancient) - suggesting this wisdom is both cosmic and timelessly old

是 謂 配 天 古 之 極 [也]
this called match heaven ancient of ultimate [indeed]

Chapter 69

。 用 兵 有 言

use military have word

Notice how '為' appears twice in this line but with different meanings - position matters in Classical Chinese!

吾 不 敢 為 主 而 為 客

I not dare act-as host and act-as guest

This line uses concrete measurements (inch/foot) to express an abstract concept - a common Classical Chinese literary device

不 敢 進 寸 而 退 尺

not dare advance inch and retreat foot

是 謂 行 無 行

this called march without marching

攘 無 臂 。

wave without arms

'扔' (throw) combined with '無敵' (no enemy) creates a powerful paradox

扔 無 敵

throw without enemy

執 無 兵

grasp without weapon

'禍' (disaster) and '莫' (none) combine to create a superlative - 'no disaster greater than...'

禍 莫 大 於 輕 敵

disaster none big than light enemy

輕 敵 幾 喪 吾 寶 .

light enemy almost lose my treasure

故 抗 兵 相 (若)

(therefore) resist army mutual (alike)

[則] 哀 者 勝 矣

[then] sorrow one victory indeed

Chapter 70

The opening line sets up an intriguing paradox about simplicity and understanding

吾 言 甚 易 知 .
I word very easy know

Notice how this line mirrors the structure of the first, but replaces 'know' with 'practice/conduct'

甚 易 行 .
very easy practice

而 (yet) marks a contrast - watch how this builds tension with the previous statements

[而] 天 下 莫 [之] 能 知 .
[yet] heaven below none [it] can know

莫 [之] 能 行 .
none [it] can practice

宗 (ancestor/origin) is a loaded term - think about what it means for words to have an 'ancestry'

言 有 宗 .
words have ancestor

事 有 君

affairs have ruler

夫 often starts a profound statement - pay attention to what follows

夫 唯 無 知 .

indeed only without knowledge

以 is a key connecting word showing cause/effect relationships

是 以 不 我 知 .

this by-means-of not me know

希 (rare) - consider what it means when those who know you are rare

知 我 者 希

know me one-who rare

則 我 者 貴 [矣]

then me one-who precious [indeed]

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

The final line presents a vivid image contrasting outer appearance with inner value - 褐 refers to coarse cloth while 玉 is jade, a precious stone

被 褐 [而] 懷 玉
wear coarse-cloth [yet] cherish jade

Chapter 71

This opening line plays with the concepts of knowing and not-knowing in a fascinating way. In Classical Chinese, repeating a word (知 know) can create different grammatical functions - here we see a noun-verb relationship.

知 不 知 (尚) [矣]
know not know (value) [indeed]

Notice how this line mirrors and inverts the previous line's structure - this is a common poetic device in Classical Chinese.

不 知 知 病 [矣]
not know know sickness [indeed]

夫 often starts a statement of universal truth - like saying 'Now...' or 'Indeed...' in English. 唯 is expressing exclusivity.

夫 唯 病 病
now only sickness sickness

是 以 不 病
this by-means-of not sickness

聖人 (sage-person) is a key concept in Daoist texts - representing the ideal cultivated individual who understands and lives in harmony with the Dao.

聖 人 不 病 .
sage person not sickness

以 其 病 病 .

by-means-of their sickness sickness

Notice how this final line echoes line 4, creating a circular structure to the chapter. What might this repetition suggest about the nature of the sage's understanding?

是 以 不 病

this by-means-of not sickness

Chapter 72

This opening line sets up a conditional statement - notice how 民 (people) appears first, emphasizing their role as the subject

民 不 畏 威

people not fear power

則 often indicates 'then' in if-then statements. Notice how 大威 (great-power) is followed by 至 (arrive) - what might this suggest about the consequences?

則 大 威 至 [矣] .

then great power arrive [indeed]

狎 is a fascinating character meaning 'to treat with disrespect' or 'to be overly familiar with' - consider how this relates to 所居 (place-dwell)

無 狎 其 所 居

do-not disrespect their place dwell

無 厭 其 所 生

do-not weary-of their place live

Notice how 夫 often starts a statement of universal truth in Classical Chinese. 唯 emphasizes what follows.

夫 唯 不 厭

indeed only not weary-of

是以 is a common Classical Chinese construction meaning 'therefore' or 'thus' - literally 'by-means-of this'

是	以	不	厭
this	by-means-of	not	weary-of

是	以	聖	人
this	by-means-of	sage	person

Notice the parallel structure in this and the next line - 自 X 不自 Y. This is a common poetic device in Classical Chinese

自	知	不	自	見	.
self	know	not	self	display	

自	愛	不	自	貴	.
self	love	not	self	value	

故 signals a conclusion. 彼 (that) and 此 (this) are often used as opposites - what might they refer to based on the previous lines?

故	去	彼	取	此
therefore	remove	that	take	this

Chapter 73

This opening line sets up a profound contrast between two types of courage - notice how the structure parallels but contrasts

． 勇 於 敢
brave in dare

則 殺
then kill

Note how this line mirrors the first, but with the addition of 不 (not) - what difference does this make to the meaning?

勇 於 不 敢
brave in not dare

則 活
then live

Here 此兩者 (these-two-things) refers back to the two types of courage just mentioned

此 兩 者 或 利 或 害
these two ones perhaps benefit perhaps harm

孰 is an classical interrogative meaning 'who' or 'what' - this line poses a philosophical question

天 之 所 惡 孰 知 其 故

heaven 's that-which hate who know its reason

是 以 聖 人 猶 難 之

this by-means-of sage person still difficult it

Notice how the next several lines follow a pattern: 不 X 而善 Y (not X but good-at Y)

天 之 道

heaven 's way

不 爭 而 善 勝 .

not compete but good-at win

不 言 而 善 應 .

not speak but good-at respond

不 召 而 自 來

not summon but self come

繚然 is an fascinating word describing something that appears loose or relaxed but is actually well-planned

繚 然 而 善 謀

relaxed thus but good-at plan

This famous metaphor 天網 (heaven's net) introduces a powerful image - what kind of net could be both loose and never miss?

天	網	恢	恢
heaven	net	vast	vast

疏	而	不	失
loose	but	not	lose

Chapter 74

This opening line sets up a profound observation about human nature and fear.

民 不 畏 死

people not fear death

'奈何' is an interrogative expression meaning 'how?' or 'what can be done?' - this line questions using death as a tool of control.

奈 何 以 死 懼 之 .

how what by-means-of death frighten them

若 使 民 常 畏 死

if cause people always fear death

Note how '為奇者' literally means 'one who does strange things' - referring to criminals or those who disturb order.

而 為 奇 者 吾 得 執 而 殺 之 .

and do strange one I can seize and kill them

A rhetorical question that makes readers pause and reflect.

孰 敢 .

who dare

'司殺者' refers to an official executioner - literally 'one who presides over killing'.

常 有 司 殺 者 —
always have preside-over kill one

夫 代 司 殺 者 殺 .
(indeed) replace preside-over kill one kill

Here '斲' means to chop or carve wood - the metaphor compares killing to a carpenter's craft.

是 謂 代 大 匠 斲 .
this called replace great craftsman chop

夫 代 大 匠 斲 者
(indeed) replace great craftsman chop one

The final line uses '希' (rare) with a powerful metaphor about attempting to replace skilled work. Think about trying to use someone else's specialized tools - what usually happens?

希 — 不 傷 其 手 矣
rare not wound their hand indeed

Chapter 75

This chapter opens with a powerful statement about hunger - notice how the (.) marks create emphasis

． 民 之 饑 ．
people of hunger

Look at how 'food' and 'tax' are connected here - what might that tell us about the relationship between rulers and ruled?

以 其 上 食 稅 之 多
by-means-of their above food tax of much

是 以 饑
this by-means-of hunger

難治 appears twice in this chapter - notice how it creates a parallel structure

民 之 難 治
people of difficult govern

有為 is a key Daoist concept meaning 'artificial action' or 'contrived action' - opposite of 無為 (non-action)

以 其 上 之 有 為
by-means-of their above of have do

是 以 難 治
this by-means-of difficult govern

Notice how 'light' here modifies 'death' - what could it mean to treat death lightly?

民 之 輕 死
people of light death

以 其 求 生 之 厚
by-means-of their seek life of thick

是 以 輕 死
this by-means-of light death

夫 is often used to start philosophical statements - it's like saying 'Now...' or 'Indeed...'

(●) 夫 唯 無 以 生 為 者
(*) indeed only without by-means-of life do one-who

This final line provides the resolution - notice how 賢 (worthy/wise) contrasts with the earlier problems

是 賢 於 貴 生
this worthy than value life

Chapter 76

This chapter opens with a profound observation about the nature of life and death. Notice how '之' is used to show possession/relation, and '也' marks the end of a topic.

。 人 之 生 也 柔 弱
person of life indeed soft weak

Notice the parallel structure with the previous line - this is a common poetic device in Classical Chinese.

其 死 也 堅 強 。
their death indeed hard strong

草木 (grass-trees) is a compound meaning vegetation/plants. This line extends the metaphor to all living things.

萬 物 草 木 之 生 也 柔 脆
ten-thousand things grass tree of life indeed soft tender

其 死 也 枯 槁 。
their death indeed withered dried-out

故 (therefore) signals this is a conclusion drawn from the previous observations. 者 marks the subject, and 徒 literally means 'follower' but implies 'category/group'

(。 故 堅 強 者 死 之 徒 。
therefore hard strong one-who death of follower

柔 弱 者 生 之 徒 .
soft weak one-who life of follower

是以 (therefore) introduces practical applications of the principle. 兵 can mean both 'weapon' and 'military/soldier'

是 以 兵 強 則 不 勝
this by-means-of weapon strong then not victory

This line has multiple possible readings - what happens when trees become too rigid? Consider the word order carefully.

木 強 則 兵 .
tree strong then weapon

處 means 'dwell/place' - consider what this means metaphorically about the relationship between strong and weak positions.

強 大 處 下 .
strong great dwell below

柔 弱 處 上
soft weak dwell above

Chapter 77

This opening line uses a beautiful metaphor comparing the Way of Heaven to a bow - notice how a bow works by both pulling and releasing...

天 之 道 其 猶 張 弓 與 .
heaven 's way it like draw bow indeed

Notice how the next few lines form a pattern of opposites - high/low, excess/insufficient. What might this tell us about balance?

高 者 抑 之 .
high one press-down it

下 者 舉 之
low one lift-up it

有 餘 者 損 之 .
have excess one reduce it

不 足 者 補 之 .
not sufficient one supplement it

Notice how '天之道' (Heaven's Way) is repeated from the opening line - this repetition is significant...

天 之 道

heaven 's way

The character '損' (reduce) appears again - try to see how this links to the bow metaphor from earlier...

損 有 餘 而 補 不 足

reduce have excess and supplement not sufficient

Here we see a contrast introduced - 'people's way' versus 'heaven's way'. What might this tell us?

人 之 道 則 不 然

people 's way then not so

損 不 足 以 奉 有 餘

reduce not sufficient by-means-of serve have excess

孰 (who) often introduces a rhetorical question in Classical Chinese. Think about what kind of answer the author expects...

孰 能 有 餘 (而) 奉 [於] 天 下

who can have excess (and) serve [to] heaven below

唯 (only) is emphasizing exclusivity - only one type of person can do this...

唯 有 道 者 .

only have way one

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

Notice how 為 (act) and 不 (not) are paired with 恃 (rely-on) - what might this tell us about the sage's attitude?

為 而 不 恃

act and not rely-on

功 成 而 不 處 .

achievement complete and not dwell

The final line uses 見 (see/appear) - consider how this relates to the sage's attitude toward recognition and fame...

其 不 欲 見 賢 .

his not desire appear worthy

Chapter 78

This opening line sets up a profound observation about water - notice how 天下 (heaven-below) is often used to mean 'all under heaven' or 'the world'

天 下 莫 柔 弱 於 水

heaven below none soft weak than water

Yet (而) introduces a contrast - watch how this builds on the water metaphor

而 攻 堅 強 者

yet attack hard strong one

莫 之 能 勝 .

none it able overcome

以 is a key Classical Chinese word that often indicates means/method - 'by means of' or 'because of'

以 其 無 以 易 之 .

by-means-of its nothing by-means-of change it

Notice how these next two lines form a parallel structure - a common poetic device in Classical Chinese

弱 之 勝 強 .

weak it overcome strong

柔 之 勝 剛 . .
soft it overcome hard

Another instance of 天下 (heaven-below) - consider how this line relates to the opening observation

天 下 莫 不 知 .
heaven below none not know

This short line carries significant weight - what's the disconnect between knowing and doing?

莫 能 行 .
none able practice

是 以 聖 人 云 .
this by-means-of sage person say

垢 (filth/disgrace) is a strong word choice here - consider what it means to 'receive' such a thing

受 國 之 垢
receive country of filth

是 謂 社 稷 [之] 主
this called soil grain [of] master

受 國 [之] 不 祥
receive country [of] not fortune

是 謂 天 下 [之] 王
this called heaven below [of] king

This final line is a famous Daoist paradox - 正 (correct) words seem 反 (opposite).
Consider how this relates to the water metaphor at the start

正 言 若 反 .
correct words seem opposite

Chapter 79

This opening line presents a profound paradox about reconciling great grievances

和 大 怨

harmonize great grievance

Note how 必 (must) and 餘 (remain/surplus) work together to create a sense of inevitability

必 有 餘 怨 .

must have remain grievance

This rhetorical question uses 安 (how) with 可 (can) - a common Classical Chinese construction expressing skepticism

安 可 以 為 善

how can by-means-of make good

是以 is a connecting phrase meaning 'therefore/thus' - watch how it leads to the sage's response to this problem

是 以 聖 人

this by-means-of sage person

契 refers to ancient contractual tallies that were split in two - one side held by each party. Which side would you rather hold?

執 左 契

hold left tally

而 不 責 於 人
yet not demand from person

Note how this phrase in brackets creates a transition connecting the previous idea to what follows

[故] 有 德 司 契
[therefore] have virtue manage tally

無 德 司 徹
without virtue manage taxation

This famous line uses 親 (relatives/favoritism) with 無 (without) to express supreme impartiality

天 道 無 親
heaven way without favoritism

與 here means 'sides with/assists' - consider how this relates to the opening paradox about grievances

常 與 善 人
always assist good person

Chapter 80

． 小 國 寡 民
small state few people

Notice how 使 (cause/make) introduces what the ruler does - it's like 'let there be' or 'make it so that'

使 有 什 伯 之 器 而 不 用 ．
cause have ten hundred of vessel/tool yet not use

使 民 重 死 而 不 遠 徙
cause people value death yet not far move

Note how 雖 (although) sets up a contrast - they have these things but...

雖 有 舟 輿 無 所 乘 之
although have boat carriage not-have place ride it

雖 有 甲 兵 無 所 陳 之
although have armor weapon not-have place display it

An fascinating historical reference - 結繩 refers to the ancient practice of keeping records by tying knots in rope, predating written characters

使 (民) 復 結 繩 而 用 之
cause (people) return tie rope and use it

Notice how the next four lines follow the same grammatical pattern: [adjective] 其 [noun]. 其 is a possessive particle - what might these lines be expressing?

甘	其	食
sweet	their	food

美	其	服
beautiful	their	clothes

安	其	居
peaceful	their	dwelling

樂	其	俗
happy	their	customs

相 is being used as a reciprocal marker - indicating actions between multiple parties. How might neighboring states relate to each other in this ideal?

鄰	國	相	望
neighbor	state	mutual	gaze

雞	犬	之	聲	相	聞
chicken	dog	of	sound	mutual	hear

民	至	老	死
people	until	old	die

不 相 往 來
not mutual go come

Chapter 81

Notice how this first pair of lines forms a chiasmus - a mirror pattern. What might this tell us about the relationship between beauty and truth in words?

信 言 不 美

trustworthy words not beautiful

美 言 不 信

beautiful words not trustworthy

Another pair of opposing statements. Consider how 者 marks the subject - it's like saying 'one who is...'

善 者 不 辯

good one-who not argue

辯 者 不 善

argue one-who not good

知 (know) and 博 (broad-learning) create an interesting tension here. What's the difference between true knowledge and mere accumulation of facts?

知 者 不 博

know one-who not broad-learning

博 者 不 知 。

broad-learning one-who not know

聖人 (sage-person) appears frequently in Daoist texts - it's the ideal wise person who embodies the Dao. What does 不積 (not-accumulate) tell us about their nature?

聖 人 不 積

sage person not accumulate

既 marks a completed action. Notice how 為 (do-for) and 與 (give-to) in these parallel lines suggest different types of giving.

既 以 為 人 己 愈 有

already by-means-of do-for others self more have

既 以 與 人 己 愈 多

already by-means-of give-to others self more abundant

天之道 (heaven's-way) is being contrasted with 聖人之道 (sage's-way). Notice how both lines end with balanced opposites.

天 之 道 利 而 不 害

heaven 's way benefit and not harm

聖 人 之 道 為 而 不 爭

sage person 's way act and not compete

