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Lao Tzu on Politics from "Tao Te Ching"

Lao Tzu

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LAO TZU

*Lao Tzu on Politics
from Tao Te Ching*

72.

When people don't feel threatened by power,
a greater power follows.

Don't squeeze people's lives.
Don't oppress them.

If they are not oppressed,
they will not resist.

Therefore the sage knows himself
without parading it,
loves himself
without treasuring himself.

Thus he discards one, choosing the other.

73.

Courageous daring leads to death.
Courage not to dare leads to life.

Both of these things
sometimes benefit
and sometimes injure.

Heaven has its dislikes,
and who knows the reason?
Even the sage finds this difficult.

Heaven's Tao does not contend,
yet skillfully conquers,
does not speak, yet answers,

is not called, but comes naturally,
is patient, but very resourceful.

Heaven's net is vast, vast,
widely meshed,
yet nothing escapes it.

74.
If people don't fear death,
why threaten them with death?

Suppose people always fear death
and wage violence,
and we seize and execute them—
who dares?

There's always the official executioner.
Taking the executioner's place
is like taking the place of a great woodcarver—
taking the place of a great artisan,
rare is the one who escapes without self-inflicted wounds.

75.
People are starving
because those in high office
keep raising taxes paid in grain.
So people go hungry.

Starving people are difficult to govern
because those in power are meddling.
Therefore people grow unruly.

The reason people take death lightly
is because they strive for a fullest life,
so make light of death.

Really, only by not pursuing life
can one live a worthy life.

76.
People are born soft and weak.
We die stiff and unyielding.

Everything—grass, trees—
begins life soft and tender,
and dies, decaying, rotting.

Therefore the hard, the unyielding
are death's companion.
The weak and pliant belong to life.

The unyielding army cannot prevail.
Unbending trees are felled.

The great unyielding belong below,
the pliant and tender above.

Translated from the Chinese by Sam Hamill