

19.5

The weakness of a wise person [in some field] makes him not as good [in that field] as a foolish person who is strong [in it]. The deficits of a worthy [in some field] make him not as good [in that field] as an ordinary person who surpasses [in it].³²

How do I know this is so? With Song painting and Wu smelting, the carving of molds and the engraving of patterns are complex and intricate. Their creation of such subtle mysteries, [even] the sages Yao and Shun could not achieve. The young girls of Cai and the talented youth of Wey

in weaving their red waistbands,
in blending their marvelous colors,
in forming their black backgrounds,

and displaying their crimson patterns
[do what even] the wisdom of Yu and Tang
could not attain! [19/205/22–24]

What Heaven covers, what Earth supports,
is contained within the six coordinates; is
embraced within the universe.³³

What yin and yang produce [from] the
essence of blood and qi [are] creatures
that have a mouthful of teeth or a head
bearing horns,³⁴ front claws or rear hooves,
soaring wings or clutching talons that
advance by wriggling or move by crawling.

When happy, they are harmonious;
when angry, they are quarrelsome;
seeing benefit, they pursue it;
avoiding harm, they withdraw from it;
their instinctive responses in this respect
are one. Although in their likes and dislikes
they do not differ from people, nonetheless,

though their claws and teeth are sharp,
though their muscles and bones are strong,
they cannot avoid being controlled by
people [because]

they cannot communicate their
intelligence to one another,
and their abilities and strength cannot be
made to act as one.

Each has its natural propensity that is not
endowed or received from the outside.

Thus their strengths have boundaries, and
their accomplishments have limits.

Now the wild goose follows the wind to fly
in order to preserve its energy and
strength. It holds straw in its mouth while
soaring in order to fend off tethered
arrows. Ants know how to build hills;
badgers³⁵ make their winding tunnels;
tigers and leopards have lairs of grass.

Wild boars have grassy nests, rows of felled trees, and burrowed holes that join one another in the manner of palaces and rooms; they provide protection to guard them from the rain and shield them from the hot sun. Thus even birds and beasts know ways to seek out and accord with what brings them benefit.

Now [suppose] a person were born in a secluded and remote state and grew up in a leaking room in a poor house, was reared without older and younger brothers, and from childhood was bereft of father and mother. If [in addition] his eyes never witnessed proper rites, his ears never heard of former or ancient times, and he lived alone in his own home without going beyond his gate—even if by nature he was not stupid, nonetheless his knowledge would certainly be wanting. [19/205/26–

19/206/8]

Long ago

Cang Jie invented writing;

Rong Cheng created the calendar;

Hu Cao³⁶ made clothing;

Lord Millet introduced agriculture;

Yi Di invented wine;

and Xi Zhong made carts.

These six men all had
the Way of spirit illumination
and [left behind] footprints of sagely
wisdom.³⁷

Thus [each] person invented something
and bequeathed it to posterity. It is not the
case that a single person alone would
have been able to do all of them. Each fully
applied his knowledge, prizing what he
hoped to achieve so that subsequently

each provided something for the world. Now if you had made these six men exchange their tasks, their brilliance would not have been apparent. Why? [It is because] the myriad things of the world are utterly numerous and knowledge is not sufficient to encompass them all. From the Zhou era onward, there have been no worthies like these six, and yet people have pursued all their callings. Among the people of the current age, there is not a single person of that caliber, yet people have come to know the Way of the Six Worthies. Education and training extended and continued [their work] so that their knowledge could flow forth and communicate with [later ages]. From this perspective, it is clear that learning can never cease. [19/206/10–14]

Now in the case of a blind person, his eyes

cannot distinguish day from night or differentiate white from black; nevertheless when he grasps the qin and plucks the strings, triply plucking and doubly pressing,³⁸ touching and plucking, pulling and releasing, his hands are like a blur, and he never misses a string. If we tried to get someone who had never played the qin to do this, though possessing the clear sight of Li Zhu or the nimble fingers of Jue Duo,³⁹ it would be as if he could neither contract nor extend a finger. What is the reason for this? Such things are made possible only through repeated practice so they become habitual.

Thus,
the bow must await the stringing frame
before it can be strung,
and the sword must await the whetstone
before it can be sharpened.

Jade is harder than anything else, but it can be carved into the shape of beasts, the heads and the tails taking their true forms; this is the achievement of the abrasive stone.⁴⁰ Wood may be as straight as a marking cord, but if it is shaped to make a wheel, its bending will match the compass. This is the power of the bending frame. Things as hard as Tang jade can still be carved; it can be formed and made into useful things. How much more so is this the case with the human heart and mind!
[19/206/16–20]

Moreover, the Quintessential Spirit is saturating and soaking, subtle and fine.⁴¹ Suddenly and quickly it alters and transforms in accordance with things it moves and shifts

like the clouds rising and the winds drifting; it establishes and applies itself where it is most useful.

Among Superior Men are those who can arouse the essence and examine the infinitesimal,
polish and grind their talents,
spontaneously exercise their spirit illumination,⁴²
observe the broad spectrum of things,
penetrate the obstructions of things,
observe the clues to beginning and end,
perceive the realm that has no exterior,
wander freely within the limitless,
meander beyond the dust of the world.
Splendidly, they stand alone;
loftily, they leave the world.

Such are the means by which the mind of the sage wanders. However, people of

later ages did not have the leisure to sit and still their thoughts, playing the qin and reading books, reflecting on observations of high antiquity, befriending worthies and great men, studying and debating, daily gaining self-mastery, delving into and analyzing the affairs of their age, distinguishing and differentiating white from black, estimating successes and losses, foretelling disasters and blessings, setting up norms and establishing rules to serve as laws and regulations, investigating thoroughly the roots and branches of the Way, studying deeply the essential qualities of things, establishing what is so and eradicating what is not so, illuminating and instructing later generations, in death, leaving a legacy, in life, possessing a glorious reputation.

Things like this are what human talent can achieve. But if no one can accomplish such things, it is because people are lazy and lax and have many idle days.

Now,

[among] people who come from regions where the soil is barren, there are many who have [good] minds. This is because their lives are laborious.

[Among] people who come from places where the soil is rich, there are many who are devoid of talents. This is because their lives are easy.

Looking at it from this perspective, a wise person who makes no effort does not compare with a foolish person who loves to learn. From the rulers, dukes, and ministers on down to the common people, there has never been a case of someone succeeding without exerting himself to the

utmost. The Odes says,

“The days pass and the months proceed;
through study of brightness and brilliance,
I gain radiance and light.”⁴³

This is what is referred to here.

[19/206/22–19/207/6]

The Huainanzi.