LVII

131 Govern the state by being straightforward; wage war by being crafty; but win the empire by not being meddlesome.

131a How do I know that it is like that? by means of this.

132 The more taboos there are in the empire
   The poorer the people;
   The more sharpened tools the people have
   The more benighted the state;
   The more skills the people have
   The further novelties multiply;
   The better known the laws and edicts
   The more thieves and robbers there are.

133 Hence the sage says,
   I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves;
   I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves;
   I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves;
   I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.

LVIII

134 When the government is muddled
   The people are simple:
   When the government is alert
   The people are cunning.

135 It is on disaster that good fortune perches;
   It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches.

135a Who knows the limit? Does not the straightforward exist? The straightforward changes again into the crafty, and the good changes again into the monstrous.
   Indeed, it is long since the people were perplexed.

136 Therefore the sage is square-edged but does not scrape,
   Has corners but does not jab,
   Extends himself but not at the expense of others,
   Shines but does not dazzle.
LX

138 Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish. *
139 When the empire is ruled in accordance with the way,
The spirits lose their potencies.
Or rather, it is not that they lose their potencies,
But that, though they have their potencies, they do not harm the people.
It is not only they who, having their potencies, do not harm the people,
The sage, also, does not harm the people.
As neither does any harm, each attributes the merit to the other. 5

LXIII

147 Do that which consists in taking no action; pursue that which is not meddlesome; savour that which has no flavour. 15
148 Make the small big and the few many; do good to him who has done you an injury.
149 Lay plans for the accomplishment of the difficult before it becomes difficult;
make something big by starting with it when small.
149a Difficult things in the world must needs have then beginnings in the easy; big things must needs have their beginnings in the small. 20
150 Therefore it is because the sage never attempts to be great that he succeeds in becoming great.
151 One who makes promises rashly rarely keeps good faith; one who is in the habit of considering things easy meets with frequent difficulties. 25
151a Therefore even the sage treats some things as difficult.
That is why in the end no difficulties can get the better of him.

*This is because a small fish can be spoiled simply by being handled.
LXIV

152 It is easy to maintain a situation while it is still secure;  
   It is easy to deal with a situation before symptoms develop;  
   It is easy to break a thing when it is yet brittle;  
   It is easy to dissolve a thing when it is yet minute.

152a Deal with a thing while it is still nothing;  
      Keep a thing in order before disorder sets in.

153 A tree that can fill the span of man's arms  
   Grows from a downy tip;  
   A terrace nine storeys high  
   Rises from hodfuls of earth;  
   A journey of a thousand miles  
   Starts from beneath one's feet.

154 Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.

154a Therefore the sage, because he does nothing, never ruins anything; and,  
   because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing.

155 In their enterprises the people  
   Always ruin them when on the verge of success.  
   Be as careful at the end as at the beginning  
   And there will be no ruined enterprises.

156 Therefore the sage desires not to desire  
   And does not value good which are hard to come by;  
   Learns to be without learning  
   And makes good the mistakes of the multitude  
   In order to help the myriad creatures to be natural and to refrain from daring to  
   act.

Lao-tzu: Tao te ching