

CHAPTER FOUR

Sun-tzu and *The Art of Living Humanly*

The usual rendering of the title to Sun-tzu's work is "The Art of War". "War" however, is an inappropriate word for Sun-tzu's work. Actually, rather than "The Art of War", the title should be *The Strategic Way to Live Humanly*. Cleary's new 1988 Shambhala Dragon edition is the source for the texts referenced in this commentary.

A Chinese proverb states: every journey begins with the first step.

This commentary begins with the third chapter, titled "Planning a Siege" because Sun-tzu's view of how to live human life begins with planning. Planning lies at the heart of Sun-tzu's practical treatise, perhaps as an explanation of the story about an ancient Chinese shih. The Shih, or lord asked his doctor which of the doctor's family of healers was most skilled in the art:

My eldest brother sees the spirit of sickness and removes it before it takes shape, so his name does not get out of the house. My elder brother cures sickness when it is still extremely minute, so his name does not get out of the neighborhood. As for me, I puncture veins, prescribe potions, and massage skin, so from time to time my name gets out and is heard among the lords.

Whereas all the brothers were doctors, and, therefore, dedicated to the healing art, only the first devotes himself to nurture health in order to prevent disease. Prevention of disease, however, is less attractive than curing disease so the first brother's reputation was less than the brothers who cured through "conventional" methods. Cures are "seen" so they are spoken about and sought, whereas keeping people healthy remains unseen and, so unknown.

Prevention of disease is less popular than the cure of diseases.

China, indeed, the oriental world looked and looks upon healing, or medical and what occidentals translate as "martial" arts as inner-related, the latter as a practical extension of the former. Both medicine and "martial" arts seek to nurture life, the former to promote healthy living, the latter to protect living healthy. Thus, these oriental arts are pro-active rather than re-active as are corresponding occidental arts. So, the *I Ching* reads: "Leaders plan in the beginning when they do things" and "Leaders consider problems and prevent them". Sun-tzu applies this *I Ching* text and the ancient Chinese doctor's comments to the living of a human life.

Self-Knowledge as the Basis of Healthy Living

This pro-active approach of prevention has its roots within Confucius' emphasis upon self-knowledge as primary to virtue and Lao-tzu's comparison of virtuous living with water flowing in nature. Indeed, oriental people view self-knowledge as the only real power of human nature. Chapter 3 restates both these analogies within, "Planning a Siege":

So, it is said that if you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know others and do not know yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle. (Sun-tzu, Chapter 3, p. 83)

Self-knowledge is the first step in the journey of life.

Of course, the purpose of planning is announced at the very beginning of the chapter:

“...those who render others’ armies helpless without fighting are the best of all”. (p. 67)

The twofold way of winning without fighting is through self-knowledge first and secondly, knowledge of others. Of course, Sun-tzu predicates the “other” to be the enemy in a war because of the state of war which existed between and among the feudal lords of the various provinces within China when he wrote. The fascinating aspect to Sun-tzu’s work is that both Chinese and Japanese then and now apply Sun-tzu’s work to the conduct of business itself, what we might call the contemporary “economic war” nations wage to “corner” the world’s markets.

The reason, of course, Sun-tzu uses war as the model is the fact that he lived during the “warring states” period, lasting from the fifth to the third centuries B.C.-historically, a Chinese instance of the American “civil war” wherein brother fought father who fought son. The Chou dynasty ruled for five hundred years. Confucius and Lao-tzu lived during the period this government was deteriorating so they spent their life in the teaching the people, Confucius in his effort to educate the shih in the reasons for the practice of virtue, as is described within the Analects and Lao-tzu in his effort to return to learning from nature. Sun-tzu took the approach of teaching people how to live within a

Prevention of conflict is better (and less popular) than fighting.

constant state of war so as to conserve their very lives - this “teaching” might bear significant fruit today were it taught to inner-city youth! Sun-tzu’s “Preface” to

strategies of the Warring States, depicts the disintegration of Chinese society in vivid detail:

Usurpers set themselves up as lords and kings; states run by pretenders and plotters set up armies to make themselves superpowers. Increasingly they imitated one another in this and their posterity followed their example. Eventually they engulfed and destroyed each other, concluding with larger territories and annexing smaller territories, passing years in violent military operations, filling the fields with bloodshed. Fathers and sons were not close to each others; brothers were not secure with each others; husbands and wives separated - no one could safeguard his or her life. Virtue disappeared. In later years, this grew increasingly extreme, with seven large states and five small states contesting each other for power. In general, this was because the Warring States were shamelessly greedy, struggling insatiably to get ahead.

Sun-tzu sought to address the central problem within the Chinese society in which he lived “...no one could safeguard his or her life”. Confucius acknowledged this same problem within Book VIII of the Analects:

The Master said, ‘Be of unwavering good faith, love learning; if attacked, be ready to die for the good way. Do not enter a State that pursues dangerous courses, nor stay in one where the people have rebelled. When the Way prevails under Heaven, then show yourself; when it does not prevail, then hide. When the Way prevails in your own land, count it a disgrace to be needy and obscure; when the Way does not prevail in your land, then count it a disgrace to be rich and honored’. (No.13; see also: Book IV, 5; Book III, 24; Book II, 19; Book XIII, 13)

Lao-tzu also faced this problem as tone poems #s 18 and 61 illustrate:

When the great **Tao** declined, the doctrine of humanity and righteousness arose.
 When knowledge and wisdom appeared, there emerged great hypocrisy.
 When the six family relationships are not in harmony, there will be the advocacy of filial piety and deep love of children.
 When a country is in disorder, there will be the praise of loyal ministers.

A big country may be compared to the lower part of a river.
 It is the converging point of the world; it is the female of the world.
 The female always overcomes the male by tranquility and by tranquility she is underneath.

A big state can take over a small state if it places itself below the small state.
 And the small state can take over a big state if it places itself below the big state.
 Thus, some, by placing themselves below, take over others.
 And some, by being naturally low, take over other states.
 After all, what a big state wants is but to annex and herd others.
 And what a small state wants is merely to join and serve others.
 Since both big and small states get what they want, the big state should place itself low.

Self-Knowledge Compared to Water in Nature

Lao-tzu’s analogy, comparing the wise man or ruler to water, offers a solution to this problem within tone poems #s 8 and 78:

The best man is like water.
 Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.
 It dwells in lowly places that all disdain.
 This is why it is so near to **Tao**.

The best man in his dwelling loves the earth.
 In his heart, he loves what is profound.
 In his associations, he loves humanity.

In his words, he loves faithfulness.

In government, he loves order.

In handling affairs, he loves competence.

In his activities, he loves timeliness.

It is because he does not compete that he is without reproach.

There is nothing softer and weaker than water
and yet, there is nothing better for attacking

Preventing a conflict takes more
courage than fighting in the conflict.

hard and strong things.

For this reason, there is no substitute for it.

All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard.

But none can practice it.

Sun-tzu also uses the analogy of water to describe the way to approach a situation threatening to a way of life:

When the speed of rushing water reaches the point where it can move boulders, this is the force of momentum. When the speed of a hawk is such that it can strike and kill, this is precision. So it is with skillful warriors - their force is swift, their precision is close. Their force is like drawing a catapult; their precision is like releasing the trigger. (Sun-tzu, Chapter 5, p. 96)

He then compares the good defender of those who threaten life to the way water faces obstacles in nature. Just as water flows with gravity and does not oppose any obstacles it encounters, but rather flows around or over them, so the wise must not oppose obstacles or difficulties which face them as they live:

...The form of water is to avoid the high and go to the low; the form of a military force is to avoid the full and attack the empty; the flow of water is determined by the earth; the victory of a military force is determined by the opponent. (Sun-tzu, Chapter 6, p. 112)

Sun-tzu combines both knowledge of self and others together with the observation of nature and applies them both to the “martial” artist and the warrior facing an enemy:

Therefore, those who know martial arts do not wander when they move, and do not become exhausted when they rise up. So it is said that when you know yourself and others, victory is not in danger; when you know sky and earth, victory is inexhaustible. (Sun-tzu, Chapter 10, p. 147)

Sun-tzu, as Lao-tzu, indeed, Confucius and Mencius advocate nature as the basic model for human inter-action. Nature’s seasons highlight its surge toward and nurture of life - the war of winter finds its surcease of sorrow in the peace of new life and achieves its seasonal purpose in the birth of spring, while the thrust of summer is the fruit of life which winds down into the peaceful beauty of fall. The ideal approach in the centrality of

life is not to confront danger with an either/or competition, but rather not to act in the case of war, particularly not to attack a self-styled enemy:

Therefore, one who is good at martial arts overcomes others' forces without battle, conquers others' cities without siege, destroys others' nations without taking a long time. (Sun -tzu, Chapter 3, p. 72)

Knowing oneself is self-defense in dealing with knowledge of others.

One who is good at laying siege does not lay siege with an army, but uses strategy to thwart the opponents', causing them to overcome themselves and destroy themselves...(Ho Yanxi, Chapter 3, pp. 72-3)

Lao-tzu uses **Tao** as the model for non-action, yet, points out that **Tao's** non-action accomplishes everything:

The **Tao** never does, yet, through it everything is done;
If princes and dukes can keep the **Tao**, the world will of its own accord be reformed.
When reformed and rising to action, let it be restrained by the Nameless pristine simplicity.
The Nameless pristine simplicity is stripped of desire (for contention).
By stripping of desire, quiescence is achieved, and the world arrives at peace of its own accord. (# 37)

Again, the oriental thinker returns to the recognition that natural phenomena are composed of two complimentary forces, yin, shadow, the dark and moist, as the yielding component of nature's reality and the yang, light, the bright and the dry, as the being strong component of nature's reality. So, just as the grass bends and the oak tree breaks when storm winds blow, so the wise, as well as armies yield to obstacles rather than opposing them if they are going to live and win. After all, neither nature's sunrise nor nature's darkness at sunset are violent: the sun merely permeates the darkness and the darkness merely swallows up the light!

Water accomplishes more in a quiet, covert manner than any loud overt tactic, indeed, more than any weapon of war.

When a man is born, he is tender and weak.
At death, he is stiff and hard.

All things, the grass as well as trees, are tender and supple while alive.

When dead, they are withered and dried.

Therefore, the stiff and the hard are companions of death.

The tender and the weak are companions of life.

Therefore, if the army is strong, it will not win.

If a tree is stiff, it will break.

The strong and the great are inferior, while the tender and the weak are superior. (# 76)

Again, even Lao-tzu provides instruction against any kind of offensive action:

He who by *Tao* purposes to help the ruler of men will oppose all conquest by force of arms.

For such things are want to rebound.

Where armies are, thorns and brambles grow.

The raising of a great host is followed by a year of dearth.

Therefore, a good general effects his purpose and stops.

He dares not rely upon the strength of arms;

effects his purpose and does not glory in it;

Effects his purpose and does not boast of it;

Effects his purpose and does not take pride in it;

Effects his purpose as a regrettable necessity;

Effects his purpose but does not love violence.

For things age after reaching their prime.

That violence would be against the *Tao* and he who is against the *Tao* perishes young.

(Tone poem # 30)

Quiet self-discipline is the key to the prevention of conflict.
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Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Others in

The Strategy of Living Humanly

The remaining chapters of *The Strategy of Living Humanly* also center their advice in the twofold knowledge of self and others. Sun-tzu begins Chapter 1, “Strategic Assessments”, for instance, with the statement:

Military action is important to the nation - it is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction, so it is imperative to examine it. (Sun-tzu, p. 41)

The prospective warrior, however, is required to have knowledge of five conditions if the good man is going to prepare entry upon this “...ground of death and life”: “...the way, the weather, the terrain, the leadership and the discipline” all in relation to self (and one’s army) and the obstacles, such as the enemy (and his army) facing oneself on the field of battle. (p. 42) (This Chinese entry upon the “...ground of death and life” reminds us of the sacred plane which spreads out before *Arjuna* within the Indian *Gita*.) “The way” means humaneness and justice; “weather” means the seasons; “terrain” means distance, difficulty or ease of travel, dimension and safety; “leadership” means intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage and sternness; “discipline” means organization, chain of command and logistics. Zhang Yu echoes the principles of *yin* and *yang* when he observes that “...only those who deeply understand the principles of adaptation (yielding) and impasse (strengthening) will win”. (p. 46) Thus, only when we assess ourselves and the obstacles according to these principles, deciding when to yield and when to stand strong will we have a chance to win. The general, therefore, requires the foresight and discipline, as we currently say, not “...to make a mountain out of a mole hill”.

But, notice that “leadership”, whether of the self or the army must have intelligence attuned to “the way” and, thus, possess the virtues of humaneness and justice

as the basis for any other knowledge and, consequent action. Treatment of self, one's army and the people among whom the self lives or in the area where the battle occurs is essential to the outcome of the battle and success in overcoming the opposition and the opponents.

If the leaders can be humane and just, sharing both the gains and the troubles of the people, then the troops will be loyal and naturally identify with the interests of the leadership. (Jia Lin, p. 44)

Adapting oneself to the circumstances encountered allows one to shape the outcome.

Lao-tzu speaks of a skillful leader of troops in similar terms:

A skillful leader of troops is not oppressive with his military strength.

A skillful fighter does not become angry.

A skillful conqueror does not compete with people.

One who is skillful in using men puts himself below them.

This is called the virtue of non-competing.

This is called the strength to use men.

This is called matching Heaven, the highest principle of old. (Tone poem # 68)

Equally important to the knowledge which you have and the way in which you treat yourself and others, however, is that the self or the army gives false knowledge about self and your army to the opposition or the enemy.

A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective. (Sun-tzu, p. 49)

So, if "...you are really competent and effective...outwardly appear to be incompetent and ineffective, then the enemy will be unprepared.

Appear to be lowly and weak, so as to make them arrogant - then they will not worry about you, and you can attack them as they relax. (Wang Xi, p. 53)

Lao-tzu places deception in the context of nature, again giving a reason for imitation of *Tao*:

What is most perfect seems incomplete; but utility is unimpaired.

What is fullest seems empty; but, its usefulness is inexhaustible.

What is most straight seems to be crooked.

The greatest skill seems to be clumsy.

The greatest eloquence seems to stutter.

Hasty movement overcomes cold, but, tranquility overcomes heat.

Being greatly tranquil, one qualifies to be ruler of the world. (Tone poem # 45)

Again, the ideal is to imitate water in nature when one faces obstacles, or the enemy; be formless and, thus, unpredictable:

To divulge means to leak out. The military has no constant form, just as water has no constant shape - adapt as you face the enemy, without letting them know beforehand what you are going to do. Therefore, assessment of the enemy is in the mind, observation of the situation is in the eyes. (Cao Cao, p. 55)

Strike at their gaps, attack when they are lax; don't let the enemy figure out how to prepare. This is why it is said that in military operations formlessness is the most effective. One of the great warrior-leaders said, 'The most efficient of movements is the one that is unexpected; the best of plans is the one that is unknown' (Meng Shi, p. 55)

Thus, the attitude of the general or any person dictates the nature of the battle. The person, therefore, who figures on victory at headquarters "...before even doing battle is the one who has the most strategic factors on his side". The one, on the contrary, who figures on inability at headquarters "...before doing battle is the one who has the least strategic factors on his side" (Sun-tzu, p. 56) So, Zhang Yu, concludes:

Therefore it is said that victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win. (p. 56)

Again, Lao-tzu describes the reason for such success without effort:

Act without action.
Do without doing.
Taste without tasting.
Whether it is big or small, many or few, repay hatred with virtue.
Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy.
Deal with the big while it is still small.
Difficult undertakings have always started with what is easy.
And great undertakings have always started with what is small.
Therefore, the sage never strives for the great and thereby the great is achieved.
He who makes rash promises surely lacks faith.
He who takes things too easily will surely encounter much difficulty.
For this reason, even the sage regards things as difficult and therefore, he encounters no
difficulty.
(Tone poem # 63)