

FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL MAX

TAKING ON A SUBJECT LIKE 德 dé, Virtue is not an endeavor for the faint of heart.

*Even though I may be in deep trouble,
I will not lose my Virtue. It is during the coldest
time of year, when frost and ice are upon us, that
the vigor of the pine and cypress becomes apparent.*

*How fortunate I am for these dire straits
I find myself in!*

*Zhuāngzi, "Ceding the throne,"
translation by Sabine Wilms*

Let's leave to the side our modern Western idea of "virtue," which is associated with goodness or righteousness, and step into the world of the ancient Chinese. Virtue

in Chinese isn't about being "good." Nor is something salvational being offered. It's about the power and influence that arises out of authentically being who you are. And here is where it gets a little tricky, because as humans we have beliefs about who we think we are, and how we think we should behave. But I suspect that living out of our 德 *dé* comes not from ideas, but rather from Being.

One way to consider this is with the image of the sovereign being in alignment with heaven, of being connected to the Polestar and thus in alignment with their purpose and destiny. As with all mythic images, this image does not point toward some external authority, but rather towards that part within each of us that resides in the emptiness of the heart.

*Our 德 *dé* does not come from what we do;
it comes from who we are.*

And when we are connected with our True North, with the path that is uniquely ours, this in turn adds a potency that guides our actions in the world.

It's what guides us toward "immortality" not in that we live forever, but rather that we live closer to the capacity that allows for inhabiting the full measure of our days.

In classical Chinese, 德 *dé* also means Power. But it's not the power of control over another. It's the power that arises from knowing your place in the world, like the sovereign knows his or her true north. Like a big cat knows its domain, or a farmer knows her landscape and its seasons.

Confucius reminds us that in society, governments, families, and medicine, there are hierarchies. And society

runs best when everyone is doing their part within the social structure. Our modern Western minds often chafe at this idea as we assume that hierarchies of any stripe are structures of corrupt oppression and that they exist for the sole benefit of those at the top. And indeed, there are corrupted hierarchies. But that is not what Confucius was pointing toward, and for us as practitioners it is helpful to know that not all hierarchies are inherently corrupt or oppressive.

There is another hierarchy that 德 *dé* points towards, and that is the hierarchy of competence that naturally arises from ability and cultivation. You choose your health-care practitioner based on this capacity, you're looking for someone who is genuinely at the top of their game. Whether you need a lawyer, a car mechanic, a marketing consultant, or a plumber, you are looking for someone honest, skilled, communicative, and fair.

In the book you're about to read, Sabine talks about 醫德 *yí dé*. We could call that “medical virtue,” or “medicine power,” or “physician power.” This kind of virtue commands respect, but does not demand it. Think about when you've been in the presence of someone who is deeply steeped in their craft. They have not reached their level of expertise and capability by cutting corners or gaming the system. They are good at what they do because they are genuinely skilled. They don't need certificates to prove their capacity. Nor do they demand titles of respect. These people are aligned with their true north. These practitioners exude confidence because they don't need confidence. Like the mythic Butcher Ding, their skill comes from who and how they are. And so an entire ox can be carved without

effort because Butcher Ding is connected to his true north, he knows his place in the world and does not seek anything else.

When you meet these people, you know it. They feel a little dangerous, like the electricity in the air before a storm. They have a kindness that has nothing to do with being nice. There is a fierceness that is available, and they're not afraid to let it out. People living in this 德 *dé* are trustworthy and constant students of their craft. They don't let their knowing get in the way of allowing uncertainty to unfold in the Dao of the moment. They are kings, not tyrants. But don't expect to be cut some slack where slack should not be given.

Consider the presence of world-class musicians and how they command your attention. Ahhh! Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. Those with the capacity that rightly has them at the top of their game. Those who are alighted with their Mandate of Heaven so that everything they do in life is in service toward that polestar. The people who are not looking for attention but have a presence that commands it. This is the kind of Virtue that 德 *dé* refers to.

Be it government, medicine, or family, we all can feel the authentic presence of the sovereign. And we all know the manipulations of the ministers who have an agenda.

醫德 *yīdé* points us towards a kind of potency that infuses our encounters, actions, and clinical work. And when we think of 醫德 *yīdé* in the more modern sense of medical ethics, it reminds us that there are power differentials to which we must attend; that that power differential is inherent in the patient/practitioner relationship;

that we have to learn to abide in the discomfort that arises if we've not resolved any lingering issues we have with power or authority; and that it is incumbent upon us that we clean up and find resolution with any issues we have around authority.

Power and authority are real and—in the realm of human relationships—unavoidable. Consider the fact that virtue, in the sense of being aligned with your true north, requires that you attend to power and hierarchy, as part of the practice of medicine. We must recognize that there is no way around hierarchies, as competent practitioners will naturally rise to the top in their craft. And here's the thing: Just like the ancient doctors were expected to not only know medicine but also painting, poetry, history, calligraphy, the workings of government, and the comings and goings of the 10,000 things, so too in our modern age it is not enough to know something about medicine. We as well must understand something of business, of how to get along with people, of being capable of living fully in the world. And like Butcher Ding, finding the empty spaces for our knives that allow our work to move with the Dao.

In this book's exploration of Virtue and Medicine, you'll find Sabine's thoughtful and careful translation of Sūn Sīmǎo's thoughts on Virtue and Practice. And especially, as it is so easy in our profession to get caught up in thinking that we are the source of our patients' healing, there is plenty in here to remind us of where the polestar actually lies.

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