

## Resolving Conflicts, the Way of the Tao (Based on the Tao Te Ching)

**Prof. Dr. Kim Cheng Patrick, LOW**

Chartered Marketer, Certified MBTI Administrator

Certified Behavioral Consultant/Visiting Professor

University of the South Pacific / Professor/ Dean, Construction Technologies, Infrastructure & Management, KazGASA, Kazakhstan; Director, Scientific Center (May 2017 to Jan 2018)

### Abstract

*This secondary literature review paper examines conflict resolution and its various cores or essences of the Tao (the Way of the Tao De Ching). In easy-to-read paper, various 'cores' of the Tao are discussed in the light of resolving conflicts.*

**Keywords:** Tao, conflict resolutions, one essence; compassion; silence (say little).

### Introduction

The Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing) is an ancient Chinese philosophical and moral text often credited to Laozi (or Lao Tzu), "the old master". "Tao" can be translated as the "path" or the "way"; it refers to the power that envelops everything, living and non-living, and flows through them too. The Tao embodies harmony, opposites ("Ying-Yang") or matchings, maintaining simply – and noticeably – that there would be no love without hate, no light without darkness, no male without female, and no mountains without valleys. A Taoist would thus be someone whose life is marked by a search for harmony and balance in all aspects of his or her life. The aim and purpose of this paper is to examine conflict resolution and its various cores or essences by the way of the Tao De Ching or that of the Tao; the paper is based on secondary literature.

### 1 Is Made of One Essence

We are all of One Essence – of the Tao, the eternal Tao.

"When the intelligent and animal souls are held together in one embrace, they can be kept from separating. When one gives undivided attention to the (vital) breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a (tender) babe. When he has cleansed away the most mysterious sights (of his imagination), he can become without a flaw." (Chapter 10, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). However, it is the human minds that (prefer to) differentiate and distinguish; hence then this is the cause of differentiations, discriminations and prejudices. Human being judges and predetermines. And (s) he divides. (S) he compares. Or worse, discriminates.

### 2 Compassion Is Thy Name

In having no grudge or inflicting conflicts with others, the nature of being a "good person" is indeed being compassionate. As with the Tao, human nature is good. And we fight, combat or contest with no one. "To those who are good (to me), I am good; and to those who are not good (to me), I am also good;--and thus (all) get to be good." (Chapter 49, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891).

### 3 Carry No Baggage

Do not be influenced by the past. Move on.

The past can give one tears. The future can give one fears for it is not certain; there is much uncertainty. Appreciate the present. Essentially, the Tao practitioner understands and attempts or seeks to do these: "If one expects a lot, then try to be without expectations. No expectations, no disappointments. Simply accept what may come or what Nature throws at you. Accept even a bad event as it carries the seed of goodness or good opportunity; when one learns to cope with a bad event, one builds one's resilience *as well as dealing with one's other party*" (Low, 2010: 7,8; *italics, author's words*). And overall, (s) he bears no baggage, carries no grudge and is free when relating with others. The past is past; and the past has nothing to do with the present.

After all, “it is better to leave a vessel unfilled, than to attempt to carry it when it is full.” (Chapter 9, Tao Te Ching; Legge, 1891).

#### **4 Empty One’s Cup or Better Still, Be Empty**

To Lao Tzu, each of us needs to be all that heaven has given us, but each act as though one has received nothing; be empty; that is all. “Learn to return to yourself.” (Heider, 1994: 79). Avoid attachments, instead detach oneself. Empty oneself and be free.

One should empty oneself to be full. “We make a vessel from a lump of clay; it is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful. We make doors and windows for a room; but it is these empty spaces that make the room liveable.” (Verse 11, Tao Teh Ching, Lao Tzu, cited in Wu, 1990: 15, also cited in Low, 2010: 2).

“When gold and jade fill the hall, their possessor cannot keep them safe. When wealth and honours lead to arrogance, this brings its evil on itself.” (Chapter 9, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). Emptying really means there is no ego or arrogance.

And without any attachment, it thus gets easier to resolve conflicts. A Taoist practitioner would also empty his or her mind; (s)he would substantiate his or her virtue, weakening his or her worldly ambition while bolstering his (her) essence or Universe nature (Chapter 3, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891).

#### **5 Detach Un-attach (Release the Negative Emotions and Maintain Calmness and Composure)**

Bruce Lee, a Taoist proponent and founder of the martial arts, JeetKune Do once said (cited in Ni, 2014), “*Emptiness (is) the starting point... drop all your preconceived and fixed ideas and be neutral. Do you know why this cup is useful? Because it is empty.*”

Certainly it is easy to allow a difficult person to upset or trouble us and ruin our day. One may feel angry, distressed, and lose one’s balance within. The first rule in the face of an unreasonable person is to maintain one’s calm composure. The less reactive one is, the more one can use one’s better judgment to handle the challenge.

A good warrior does not lose his temper. (Chapter 68, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). When one feels angry or upset with someone, before one says something one might later regret, take a deep breath and count slowly to ten. In most circumstances, by the time one reaches ten, one would have figured out a better way of communicating the issue, so that one can reduce, instead of escalate the problem. If one is still upset after counting to ten, take a time out if possible, and revisit the issue after one calms down.

Lao Tzu says:

...the self-controlled man governs  
by stilling the emotions,  
by quieting thought,  
by mastering the will,  
by increasing strength.

(Tao Te Ching, Chapter 3) (Mears, 1949: 25; also cited in Low, 2005: 12)

By keeping one’s [self-control](#), one taps more power to manage the situation. After all, as Lao Tzu said, “He who knows other men is discerning; he who knows himself is intelligent. He who overcomes others is strong; he who overcomes himself is mighty” (Chapter 33, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891).

#### **6 Know Oneself**

The Tao encourages and heartens each of us to be in touch with one’s own self, particularly one’s deepest self, for when one knows who one really is, that is when one discovers eternal peace. Lao Tzu liked to compare different parts of nature to different virtues. Lao Tzu said (cited in ReShel, 2016), “The best people are like water, which benefits all things and does not compete with them. It stays in lowly places that others reject. This is why it is so similar to the Way (Dao).” Each part of nature can remind us of a quality we admire and should cultivate ourselves – the strength of the mountains, the resilience of trees, the cheerfulness of flowers.

#### **7 Stay Humble**

The upright person “is free from self-display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged; from self-complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority.” (Chapter 22 of the Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891).

Yes, not boasting, but the true Tao cultivator will act in line with what Lerner (1976: 109) highlighted, that is: Just as we place a fine sword in its protective sheath, so too should we conceal our strength in the presence of others.

Should there be a conflict, and the other party boasts or brags, then to subscribe to the Taoist way, one, be (s)he in the right or wrong, would just remain humble, and practices humility. Chapter 22 of the Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891) highlighted, “Therefore the sage holds in his embrace the one thing (of humility), and manifests it to all the world.”

One should be humble – like water that occupies lowly places. Chapter 8 of the Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891) thus pointed out that, “The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Tao... .. And when (one with the highest excellence) does not wrangle (about his low position), no one finds fault with him.”

In the context of negotiation when resolving conflicts, this can be seen in the form of listening to the other side’s position and paying attention to the other party as well as seeing how one can adapt both positions to create a generous outcome.

One also needs to be practical. And naturally, wisdom is the key in this area, because an unwise position of humbleness or even self-effacement (often known or seen as being a doormat) entails the other party will attempt and take advantage of one in the business world, and in conflict, the person one negotiates with will not take one seriously. So balance is essential, and one has to be aware of what this term signifies. Then again, this does not matter, after all, “(as it is like in the following verse by Chuang Tzu: The cinnamon tree is edible, so it is cut down. The lacquer tree is useful, so it is slashed. Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful, But no one knows the usefulness of the useless. (Chuang Tzu, cited in Low, 2010: 4,5)”

### **8 Diminish or Reduce One’s Ego**

To give or yield is to preserve the whole (Chapter 22, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). “One should not be conscious of oneself – “establish nothing in regard to oneself” (Lee, 1975: 8, also cited in Low, 2011: 130). Clay is molded into a pot or vase. It is indeed the empty space that serves the purpose of a pot or vase. Doors and windows are formed and fashioned to make a room. It is the empty space in the room that provides its utility and use. Hence, without ego or attachment, man fulfils his role and remains compassionate; there are no conflicts or that they can be minimised. Thus, something substantial can be beneficial while the emptiness of void is what can be utilized (Chapter 11, Tao Te Ching; Legge, 1891).

And Chapter 16, Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891) maintained that human must attain the vital void and uphold calmness with sincerity in order to observe the growth and flourish of all beings.

### **9 Be Compassionate**

Should we not simply practice compassion? Should we not have a compassionate alertness or impromptu instead of constantly watching the clock, it will be fine. If there is one thing of chief importance with a good deed, it has to be its timeliness. Neither too early nor too late will do. But timeliness also entails that one is alert to the needs of others, so that one can help them when the time comes. To be timely is to always be compassionate. It does not at all mean that one should postpone a good deed until one is certain that the time is good for it. All of us should always be eager or keen to help each other. Then all of us will do so just in time, without thought and spontaneously.

### **10 Co-Exist or Go For Collaboration**

While minimizing one’s ego, one extends out one’s hand to cooperate or collaborate with the other party. One builds a good relationship with the other party, a good value-adding ingredient when negotiating or resolving conflicts. And this relationship is built on respect for every party’s (individual’s) interests. This approach reveals people’s preferences and constraints, and engages everyone in constructing solutions that go way beyond the original alternatives (Kofman, 2017). There is much mutual respect and builds a win-win for all; and indeed constructive collaboration allows people to express and understand each other’s needs while creating new solutions and answers.

### **11 Disregard Meanness, Stinginess and Tightfistedness**

Lao Tzu repeatedly stressed that one must have compassion for the person opposing one, and one should regard him or her as a potential teacher. When one sees evil in another person, it is really one's own Shadow falling upon that person; and one must be responsible for controlling that negativity (Wyatt, 2012).

Instead of being mean and tight-fisted, in conflicts, one is to be good-natured, supportive or kind-hearted. And when subscribing to the Way of the Tao, one should be generous and big-hearted to the other party. Here, being generous means one gives discounts or the benefits of the doubt to the other party, taking that perhaps the other party may have unintentionally made a mistake. Even so, whatever the case may be, (s)he may have had good intentions and meant well.

### ***12 Practice “Being Kingliness”***

In connection with the above, Chapter 16 of the Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891) highlighted that that being generous, a person is impartial. Being impartial, (s)he is the sovereign or “being kingliness”. “Being kingliness” is the nature itself. Nature is Tao. Tao is everlasting. Essentially, the Tao negotiator is dispassionate, disinterested, or impartial (Low, 2010\*); (s)he negotiates unemotionally while relating well with the other party. Tao, the Way is literally “harmony spirit way” or more poetically, “The way of harmonizing with the spirit of the universe” (Leonard, 2000: ix; also cited in Low, 2005). And in a “harmony spirit way”, a Taoist practitioner should be high-minded and magnanimous. A man of countless virtue is truly one who follows the nature way of Tao. The grandest forms of active force come from Tao, their only source.(Chapter 21, Tao Te Ching; Legge, 1891).

### ***13 Be Like Water, Be Flexible and Apply Humor***

Be like water. “Nothing in the world is softer... than water.” (Verse 78, Tao Teh Ching, Lao Tzu cited in Wu, 1990: 111). Being softer, it is flexible too. And one can also flexibly add humor to resolve conflicts.

Ni (2014) spoke of humor as being a powerful communication tool. He added, that “Years ago, I knew a co-worker who was quite stuck up. One day, a colleague of mine said “Hello, how are you?” to him. When the egotistical co-worker ignored her greeting completely, my colleague didn't feel offended. Instead, she smiled good-naturedly and quipped: “That good, huh?” This broke the ice and the two of them started a friendly conversation. Brilliant.”

When appropriately used, humor can shine light on the truth, disarm a difficult behavior, and shows that one has a superior composure.

### ***14 Wait and See***

Lao Tze also spoke of patience, one of the three treasures; the other two being, simplicity and compassion. Interestingly, the Tao's equivalent of “Rome was not built in a single day” is Lao Tzu's oft-heard saying: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. Patience, highly valued, is one of the three treasures in life as preached by Lao Tzu (Low, 2009; 2010). When we are impatient, we rush, and we can become easily unbalanced or upset. It is in going slowly that we can keep our balance and not lose sight of our way. “When we are patient, we do not rush. We are not easily provoked or get angry. We, in fact, become more being than becoming.” (Low, 2009; 2010). And accordingly, Lao Tzu advised to take a slow course in times of conflict and to refuse to make the first move. Rushing too quickly in a stressed or edgy situation can cause emotional over-reaction and accelerate the misunderstanding (Wyatt, 2012).

### ***15 Let the “Mud Settle”***

Have patience during times of conflict and wait until one can clearly see the right action to take. The next step will sooner or later arise by itself and one will know how and when to proceed if one is calm and careful (Wyatt, 2012).

### ***16 Say Little***

In fact, it is better (or even best) to be silent. Lao Tzu's famous quote is, “He who knows (the Tao) does not (care to) speak (about it); he who is (ever ready to) speak about it does not know it. He (who knows it) will keep his mouth shut and close the portals (of his nostrils)” (Chapter 56, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). The wise does not speak. He who speaks is not wise. And a Chinese saying has it that, “a tongue six inches long can kill a man six-foot tall”. Indeed talking too much allows the mouth to be a conduit for out-of-control emotion and can aggravate and further confuse the conflict. Restrict the words one speaks or writes to carefully chosen messages that are simple and direct.

## **17 Retreat a Yard**

In this surprising tactic (Chapter 69, Tao Te Ching; Legge, 1891), Lao Tzu mentioned that a wise general knows that it is better to retreat a little than to advance even an inch, thus forcing the opponent to make the first move and become vulnerable.

When one steps back at the beginning of a difficult encounter, one can reflect, ponder and/ or get a clearer view of what is happening. This coincides with what Marter's (2017) point of "Pause and get grounded. If your feathers are ruffled, it's best to take a moment to regroup before having a knee-jerk reaction you might regret later."

[Citing Grigg (1994), Low (2010: 6) spoke of, "The Tao's Way is to empty when there is too much and to fill when there is not enough. Such is its way. When the mind is too full, it must be emptied. When it is empty, it will be filled by the Tao." He also added that, "Socrates once said that 'an unexamined life is not worth living'. (One needs to also) examine one's life. (Each time, one) examine(s) what has happened. And reflect."]

Besides, when one pauses and reflects, one can then come to an understanding of one's other party approach. This also helps one to better equip oneself with wisdom and insights.

## **18 Avoid or Don't Use Force**

A loyal Tao cultivator does not use force (Chapter 68, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891). Tao Te Ching upholds the use of soft power. More so, it is better and more persuasive when one is sincere, kind, compassionate and gentle as well as humble ('No one likes a boaster cock or a bragger.'). Besides, the qualities mentioned build the trust of the other party of us. One Taoist central idea maintains that "Weakness is the usage of Tao" (Lao Tzu, Chap. 40). The best embodiment of this axiom is water. People may obtain the awareness of Tao by picturing water. The highest good is like water, not only because water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, but also because water, which is nurturing, soft, weak and flexible, can defeat hard and strong obstacles by selecting alternatives to reach its goals. As water does not compete, nobody can compete with it (Chap. 8 & 78, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891)

A softer attitude normally overwhelms a harder one; and so presenting a sincere gentleness not only shows strengths of one's confidence and prowess, but also helps to breakthrough or at least softens the inflexible positions of the otherparty. Besides, one, in a way, role-models the process(es) for the other party to follow, mimic or emulate.

It is worthy to note that force is not to be used. In Chapter 30, Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891), we are reminded that, "He who would assist a lord of men in harmony with the Tao will not assert his mastery in the kingdom by force of arms. Such a course is sure to meet with its proper return."

And in Chapter 31, Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891), we are told that "arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. Therefore they who have the Tao do not like to employ them."

Then again, just as the sword is to defend, and not to attack; so also, the Tao practitioner/ negotiator uses his skills, not to boast or show arrogance, but to defend while seeking peace or mutual gains with the other party ("To guard the weak is called strength" Tao De Ching, cited in Mears, 1949: 80).

War can also be taken as conflict; and military action should be avoided as much as possible –and this is practical–because violence always causes a negative rebound (Burke, 2018). Actually, government should avoid any kind of coercion, for those who bring pressure or threats on others and force them to go against their principles or will, in time will find the same thing happening to them. Those who use reason and benevolence will find the same virtues being levelled at them. This also applies to individuals: kindness and reason bolstered by good examples(Low, 2011) are good persuasive ways we should affect, move or influence others whenever possible. Note that every forceful action results in an equal and opposite act of force, both of which are unhelpful and destructive. A solution will come in its own time if one does not rush or push too hard for it to occur.

## **19 Non-Doing**

There are, it is said, many interpretations of Wu-wei or non-action. One insightful view of Wu wei is that sometimes one makes greater progress by not interfering with the activities of others. Rather, allowing a course of events grow on its own, as it were, with patience, confidence, and open, accepting attention, can permit the being or event to develop as it should. Wu we proposes stepping out of the way, rather than directing, controlling and manipulating events.

To draw on a hackneyed term, Wu wei suggests a holistic approach, where the mediator or go-between recognizes that larger forces are at play and lets, encourages or assists in their constructive movement. Many practical applications of “non-doing”, with which we are all familiar, exist. All of us know that sometimes it makes sense to hold one’s tongue or be silent. All of us have went through moments when, by letting someone struggle with a problem, we permit them to arrive at a solution which our intermeddling might have blocked. Our silence can let a truthful expression or insight to develop in a dialogue that our talk might have stifled. Tact is based on non-doing.

### **20 Apply the Hard and Use the Soft**

The Book of Change, *I-Ching*, explained: “Tao means a Yin and a Yang”. When there is Yin and Yang interaction, Tao is at work. The universe is on the move all the time (Low, 2005a). And when negotiating in a conflict resolution situation, the Tao negotiator/ practitioner should be aware, knowingly applying the hard (working to achieve the goals/ negotiation outcomes as in the negotiation content and subject matter) and using the soft (attaining good relationships with the other party such as establishing good rapport, giving good listening and paying good attention to the other party as well as attaining an overall agreeable interpersonal interactions).

Not bringing in or building relationships first is one of the biggest mistakes individuals makes in negotiations; they do not get to know their other party(ies) (Vozza, 2014). One needs to slow down and make connections with people and one will garner useful information that can be used to detect what they value in life, what motivates or persuades them, and what annoys them. Clearly so, master negotiators apply the hard while using the soft. Successful negotiators indeed vouchsafe that it is good to bring value to all their relationships. After all, building and looking after relationships creates a value exchange, and this creates leverage, making it easier to bargain or negotiate with the other party (The Oracles, 2017; Low, 2010\*).

Here, Locke (2007: 62) highlighted that the Chinese have a definite concern or interest for a harmonious relationship other than the win-win solution. Besides, many people in China recognize that managing conflict through collaboration strengthens the relationship further.

### **21 Deal with It, but Be Prepared**

It is worthy to note that conflict is everywhere in nature. Conflict, hostility, opposition, dissonance, struggle; this is the nature of the world. But one could not have any of those things without their opposites; harmony, agreement, identity, consonance and surrender. This is also the nature of the world. The way includes both. How does nature resolve conflict? It does not, it simply makes the resolution serve a useful purpose. Sometimes conflicts need to happen, and resisting them, avoiding them, is itself a problem. All of us don’t seek to or look for a fight. But when the fight comes to us, we will deal with it before it gets out of hand.

Indeed one must take actions before things occur. One needs to manage before things get out of order. Please take a look at Chapter 64 of the Tao Te Ching (Legge, 1891), here Lao Tzu reminded, “That which is at rest is easily kept hold of; before a thing has given indications of its presence, it is easy to take measures against it; that which is brittle is easily broken; that which is very small is easily dispersed. Action should be taken before a thing has made its appearance; order should be secured before disorder has begun.

The tree which fills the arms grew from the tiniest sprout; the tower of nine-storeys rose from a (small) heap of earth; the journey of a thousand li commenced with a single step.

He who acts (with an ulterior purpose) does harm; he who takes hold of a thing (in the same way) loses his hold. The sage does not act (so), and therefore does no harm; he does not lay hold (so), and therefore does not lose his hold. (But) people in their conduct of affairs are constantly ruining them when they are on the eve of success. If they were careful at the end, as (they should be) at the beginning, they would not so ruin them.

Therefore, the sage desires what (other men) do not desire, and does not prize things difficult to get; he learns what (other men) do not learn, and turns back to what the multitude of men have passed by. Thus he helps the natural development of all things, and does not dare to act (with an ulterior purpose of his own).”

To be sure all difficult affairs must be taken care of when they are easy. All great achievements must be made from the small tasks. Hence, a saint (*a Taoist practitioner*) does not endeavour to do something great. And as a result,(s)he is able to achieve the great.(Chapter 63, Tao Te Ching, Legge, 1891, *italics, author’s words*).

## Concluding Remarks

In concluding this paper, please see Figure 1 depicting the Tao essences, the ways in resolving conflicts.

Figure 1. Tao and its essences, resolving conflicts



One enters life with a seemingly fresh or unsoiled slate, a great pathway ahead of us with unlimited abilities, possibilities and choices. To steer our lives and get a handle on the challenges and gifts life will throw at us, it is helpful to have some sort of compass so that we don't end up on the rocks or lost at sea. And the Tao Te Ching offers us these guidelines or virtues (ReShel, 2016); and they are:

### 1. Cherish and Respect Life

All of us have unconditional love and positive regard for all creatures in the universe, starting with ourselves; then, this will naturally flow out to all others.

### 2. Be Sincere, Kind and Authentic

"Tao is the wonder of all creations. It is a treasure for those who are kind. It can also protect those who are not kind. Words of Tao can benefit all people. Its action can guide people to follow the right Way." (Chapter 62, Tao Te Ching; Legge, 1891).

One naturally has a feeling of compassion and an all-encompassing love for all beings. When all of us are sincere and act with integrity, we move towards peace and inner tranquillity. Our conscience clear, we do not have the inner doubts or worries over our dishonest actions that can erode a peaceful mind.

### 3. Be Gentle

Often perceived or seen as weakness, gentleness is sensitivity, respect, and reverence for all life. Perhaps this quality can be summed up by the Dalai Lama who often said; "my religion is very simple, my religion is kindness." In life, it is far more important to be kind than to be right, and to be kind rather than important. The late Wayne Dyer (cited in ReShel, 2016) spoke of, "Gentleness generally implies that you no longer have a strong ego-inspired desire to dominate or control others, which allows you to move into a rhythm with the universe. You cooperate with it, much like a surfer who rides with the waves instead of trying to overpower them.

Gentleness means accepting life and people as they are, rather than insisting that they be as you are. As you practice living this way, blame disappears and you enjoy a peaceful world.”

#### 4. Be Supportive

When one is supportive of him(her)self, with kind words, loving actions and self-care, (s)he is naturally supportive of others. This virtue is the basic tenet of humanity. Each of us is a naturally social being and, at his or her core, each wants to be with others and to help others. Many experiments show how humans are motivated, inspired or encouraged by connection and will move towards this rather than other things. When one gives to others, shares and supports others, one becomes happy. One’s life (our lives) become(s) meaningful and one/ our heart(s) full. Supportiveness is about service.

And all in all, as Wayne Dyer highlighted (cited in ReShel, 2016), “The more your life is harmonised with the four virtues, the less you’re controlled by the uncompromising ego.” To this author, ego can be a great stumbling block towards conflict resolutions between and among parties.

Professor, Dean, Construction Technologies and Management & Director, Scientific Center, Kazakh American University (KAU) & Kazakh Leading Academy of Architecture & Civil Engineering (KazGASA) (end May 2017 to early Jan 2018)

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