Volume One (Chapters 1-37)

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Chapter 1

Original Text

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Translation

The Dao that can be spoken is not the constant, enduring Dao.

The name that can be named is not the constant, enduring name.

“Nameless” is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “with a name” is the mother of the myriad beings.

Therefore, constantly without desire, one views its marvel; constantly with desire, one views its threshold.

These two arise from the same source yet bear different names; both are called “mysterious.” Mysterious, and yet more mysterious—the gate of all marvels.

Word Notes

- □ — **“Dao”**: the Way; the fundamental principle.
- □□ — **“can be spoken”**: expressible in words.
- □□□□□ — **“constant, enduring”**: abiding, unperishing.
- □ — **“name”**: designation, signifier, manifest label.

- □□ **— “can be named”**: can be affixed with a label.
- □ **— “marvel”**: the numinous, wondrous aspect.
- □ **— “threshold”**: the hinge/knack, the keyhole or pivot by which a thing opens.
- □ **— “mysterious”**: deep, far-reaching, unfathomable.

Chapter Explanation

Any Dao that can be put into words is not the constant, unperishing Dao. Any name that can be affixed is not the constant, unperishing name. “Nameless” names the starting point from which Heaven and Earth arise; “with a name” names the mother from whom the myriad beings flock forth.

Therefore, uniting Dao as a single whole, one constantly keeps true emptiness—without intentional thought—in order to behold the Dao’s marvel. One constantly keeps wondrous existence—with intentional attention—in order to behold the Dao’s “threshold.” These two—true emptiness and wondrous existence—issue from the unspeakable Dao, but bear two different names; both may be called “mysterious.” “Mysterious, and yet more mysterious”—this is the gate from which every marvel comes forth.

Discourse

This chapter says that **Dao** is the source of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad beings; **De** (Virtue) is Dao’s movement and turning. Laozi speaks of Dao and De by starting from a pre-celestial, formless ground—mysterious and beyond reckoning, soundless and scentless, beyond anyone’s grasp. Confucius called it “like a dragon,” praising a Dao and De that, like a dragon, sometimes submerges and sometimes leaps, now appears and now hides—its changes incalculable, its being or non-being unknown. His words are of this sort: if someone clings to post-celestial principles that have shape and substance, how could he even glimpse a single scale or claw of the dragon?

Yet although Laozi speaks from pre-celestial emptiness, this emptiness is supremely substantial; this “non-being” is supremely being. It has both body and function, root and branch; it is not a vacuity without use. For example, in this very chapter he says the true and constant Dao cannot be spoken; “Dao” itself is only a forced, provisional term. If Dao cannot be spoken, one should not force a name upon it either—this is “emptiness.” But only because there is an unspeakable Dao can there be all the speakable “ways”; only because there is an unnameable “name” can there be all the nameable names. It is the beginning of Heaven and Earth, the mother of the myriad beings. Thus it is “emptiness” yet not vacuity; and although it is “not vacuity,” the Dao that gives birth to Heaven, Earth, and the myriad beings cannot be seen or heard—presence that is non-presence; what is present returns to non-being. Hence “non-being” and “being” arise from the same source yet bear different names; both are mysterious and unfathomable.

Human beings receive the whole of Dao; thus we should embody Dao's spontaneity—**in true emptiness to behold Dao's marvel, and in wondrous existence to behold Dao's threshold.** Later inner-alchemy interpreters took "threshold and marvel" to mean a single "Mysterious Pass," claiming that if one trains and passes through this "pass," one becomes an undying "golden immortal." They do not realize such readings see only a scale or a claw, without grasping the dragon's entire virtue. Bai Juyi once said: *Laozi does not talk about drugs and cinnabar, nor of "ascending to the blue heavens in daylight."* "Threshold" and "marvel" certainly name Dao's body and function; but under Heaven, in states and nations, and in one's body, mind, nature, and life—in every affair and object—each has its own threshold and its own marvel. The spring of a lock is its "threshold"; when the key meets the threshold, the lock opens—the opening is the "marvel." If one does not grasp threshold and marvel, one may break the lock and still fail to open it; if one does grasp them, it is easy.

Therefore, in the world, for dealing with people and affairs, knowing the **threshold** is the first necessity. In self-cultivation, if one does not know it one injures one's nature and life; in administration, if one does not know it one disorders the state. Scientists who build airships and steamers that move through sky and sea do so by grasping the thresholds of matter. Emperor Shun's "non-action" by which the realm was ordered, and the way Confucius put Lu in order within three months—both were by knowing the thresholds of governance.

But everything has its threshold—some are known without laborious seeking. What, then, is the threshold of this **Dao**? The globe is now riven by war and slaughter, decaying beyond endurance; power-grabs and profit-seizure brutalize human relations. Where, then, is the threshold that will save the world? I will cry it out loudly: I respectfully reveal Laozi's secret for stopping warfare to the peoples of all nations. **The marvel is the empty Dao; the threshold is the life-cherishing De.** Otherwise, when private desire fills one's chest and cruelty hardens into habit, how could one not wage war and kill?

Alas—these years of war and slaughter—countless lives have been lost, and wealth consumed beyond reckoning. Fellow humans, fellow humans, awaken! Let us all practice Laozi's Dao and De; turn back the tide of killing so that all nations may share the blessings of kinship, peace, and wellbeing.

Chapter 2

Original Text

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Translation

When all under Heaven know beauty as “beauty,” there is already “ugly.”

When all know good as “good,” there is already “not-good.”

Therefore being and nonbeing give birth to one another; hard and easy complete one another; long and short set one another off; high and low tip one another; tone and timbre harmonize with one another; front and back follow one another.

Thus the Sage attends to affairs of nonaction and conducts a teaching without words.

The myriad beings arise through it and he does not refuse; he gives life yet does not make them his own, acts yet does not rely on it, achieves merit yet does not dwell in it.

Only because he does not dwell in it, therefore it does not depart.

Word Notes

- □ **— “beauty”**: good, fine.
- □ **— “ugly / bad”**: not good.
- □ **— “good”**: moral goodness.
- □ **— “to set off”**: to give shape/serve as a foil by comparison.
- □ **— “to tip”**: to lean/overbalance.
- □ **— “to harmonize”**: to attune/blend.
- □ **— “to refuse”**: to decline/shirk.
- □ **— “to rely on”**: to depend on, to trust in.

Chapter Explanation

All under Heaven know that what is called “beautiful” counts as “good,” and so many will pose as beautiful—beauty then ceases to be beauty. All know that what is called “good” counts as “virtue,” and so many will counterfeit goodness—goodness then ceases to be good. This “not-beautiful” and “not-good” arise from beauty and goodness themselves.

Therefore, **being** and **nonbeing** are mutually generative; **hard** and **easy** bring one another to completion; **long** and **short** set one another off; **high** and **low** overbalance one another; **loud** and **soft** tones harmonize; **front** and **back** follow each other in turn.

Accordingly, the Sage handles affairs **by nonaction** and carries out **a teaching without words**. When things come forth, he **does not refuse** them, letting them follow their nature. He **gives life** to beings but **does not make them his own**; he **acts** yet **does not rely on** the action; he **achieves** and yet **does not dwell** in the achievement. Precisely because he does not dwell in it, his **merit abides** and does not pass away.

Discourse

This chapter teaches that whenever something arises with a **name and form**—“beauty,” “good”—it stands in **contrast**. Where there is beauty, there is not-beauty; where there is good, there is not-good. And this not-beauty and not-good spring from beauty and good themselves. Thus what belongs to the **post-celestial** realm of named forms is insufficient to be Dao’s **substance**.

Yet if we cling to the **pre-celestial** alone, there is no **function**. **Without the post-celestial, the pre-celestial cannot be brought to completion.** The limit of the post-celestial is precisely the pre-celestial; pre and post **cycle into** one another. The hinge where this cycling meets is where **threshold (□)** and **marvel (□)** arise. The Sage, having grasped the threshold, **grounds himself in the pre-celestial** and **uses the post-celestial**, yet does not become stained by it. Hence he “handles affairs of nonaction” and naturally rules by **self-reverence**; he “conducts a teaching without words” and naturally **lets transformation persist in spirit**.

Though the myriad beings arise in profusion, he lets them follow their native endowment so that they **grow together without harm**. And he **does not** call **giving life** a **virtue** to his credit; he **does not** call **bringing to completion** a **merit**. Cool and even, he sees that the merit of giving life and finishing things belongs to **Dao's spontaneity**. Not only would **relying on virtue** and **dwelling in achievement** disqualify it as virtue and merit; even **the name** "merit" drops one back into the traces of the post-celestial.

Later readers failed to grasp Laozi's true meaning and accused him of "quietism" that **blocks progress**. They do not see that Laozi's **nonaction** is **"nonaction whereby nothing is left undone"**—attending to the **body** of nonaction while **using** the **function** of action, without clinging to action. To **cling** to action is to do only **little** deeds, not **great** ones; to act for **one**, not for **many**; to keep **acting without rest** until one is **unable to act**.

Consider: Western learning prizes **rest**—everyone sleeps. **Rest** is nonaction; yet by rest, spirit is restored and one can undertake **all** work. If one works without rest, one dies within a week—this is **action** turning into **no action**, indeed **nothing done**. Or consider **electrons**: in open space they seem to do nothing—**nonaction**—yet by their **combining** they constitute every thing under Heaven. Once formed, without a change in temperature or pressure, a thing cannot become something else. Thus the **original combining**—the nonaction—remains the greater action. Or think of a **skilled operator** before many machines: he sits still—**nonaction**—watching the motions. When a motion runs rough he adds water, fuel, or oil, or adjusts a lever—**action**. Once the machine runs again, he returns to stillness. Should he cling to action and fuss over a single unit, the others would stall or run off-spec and all would be in disorder. Hence **nonaction** is supremely subtle—the **body** and **mother** of action.

People call Daoist nonaction "useless," as if it retarded evolution. They do not understand **progress**. The **evolution of devices** proceeds from the pre-celestial to the post-celestial; pushed to the extreme, it **exhausts** material potentials and the earth's creatures perish—so-called "evolution" becomes **regression**. This is not to blame device-evolution—such evolution too is **natural** and without it there would be **no world**. My earlier remark that "what is purely pre-celestial has no function" was meant to break a one-sided view, not to belittle invention.

Laozi's "handling affairs by nonaction" and "achievement without dwelling" is the **evolution of Dao-learning**—the genuine **progress**. Strictly speaking, Laozi even **speaks of regression**: the **Great Dao does not regress**, yet without regression the **world** would not appear. Anything that can be spoken or seen is **already the regressed Dao**. Pushed to the limit, regression **becomes** progress; pushed to the limit, progress **becomes** regression—**a cycle**. For convenience we call the device-path "regression" and the Dao-path "progress," but the two progressions and regressions **interpenetrate**.

After Laozi's five thousand characters, Guan Yin, Zhuangzi, and Liezi elaborated—"progress," yes, but often **empty talk** without concrete works. In the **Han** after the wars of the Warring States, **Cao Shen** used **a portion** of Laozi's Dao to bring peace; under **Emperor Wen**, punishments nearly **fell into disuse**, and the realm had the flavor of **Cheng and Kang**; people esteemed the **Yellow-Lao** learning. That was **one part** of Laozi's Dao reaching an **apex**. When Dao-learning regresses, device-learning advances. Europe's new learning began from the **Han**. From then on, Laozi's Dao

turned into **Ge Hong’s** alchemy, then **Kou Qianzhi’s** talismans; it flowed into **prayers, charms, and technical arts**, and into **empty talkers** of **Jin**, dissipated and unrestrained. **Han Yu** therefore denounced it; Song scholars followed, claiming Lao-learning was worse than **Yang** and **Mo**.

By today, Western devices have evolved to the extreme: for **strength**, they surpass us a hundredfold; for **wealth**, in craft and industry, likewise. Having long lost **useful true Dao-learning**, and not understanding devices, how could we not seem **poor and weak**? Thus hot-blooded reformers, eager to save the nation, dumped all blame on **Laozi**. The whole country echoed them, treating “old learning” like **poison**. But now device-learning has reached its limit and must **regress**; Dao-learning must **advance**. Not into **extinction**, but away from **exaltation**—and yet devices will **still** evolve, since devices are **one part** of Dao. Formerly, **a portion** of Laozi’s Dao could stop the **wars of our land**; today, **the whole** of Laozi’s **Great Dao** can stop the **world’s** wars.

The **threshold** and **marvel** I observed years ago are just this: let everyone **speak Dao and discuss De**, and **evolve** with the **Great Dao**. If all we know is **competition**, we slide with devices into **regression**. Western sages developed devices so that all might share **material** happiness; I join those who love Dao in developing Dao-learning so all might share **moral** happiness.

Chapter 3

Original Text

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Translation

Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not compete.

Do not value hard-to-get goods, and the people will not become thieves.

Do not put what can be desired on display, and the people’s hearts will not be thrown into disorder.

Therefore, in the Sage’s governance, he empties their hearts, fills their bellies, softens their will, and strengthens their bones.

He constantly makes the people without cunning and without cravings, so that even the clever do not dare to act (deviously).

By acting through nonaction, nothing is left ungoverned.

Word Notes

- □ **— “worthy/able”**: persons of talent and ability.

- □ **— “to compete”**: to contend, to vie for gain or fame.
- □□□ **— “hard-to-get goods”**: precious goods/valuables people prize.
- □ **— “thief / to steal”**: stealing, robbery.
- □□ **— “what can be desired”**: objects of appetite that stir cravings.
- □ **— “empty”**: to make empty; to clear out (extravagance).
- □ **— “fill”**: to make full; to return to plain sufficiency.
- □ **— “soften/weaken”**: to make gentle, to quell contentious ardor.
- □ **— “strengthen”**: to make firm/stout.
- □ **— “bones”**: backbone; one’s physical sturdiness and upright bearing.
- □□ — “without cunning” (not crafty/scheming).
- □□ — “without cravings” (free from appetitive urges).
- □□□ **— “act through nonaction”**: handle affairs without force or clinging.

Chapter Explanation

Not exalting people of ability prevents the populace from competing for reputation. Not making much of hard-to-get goods keeps the people from stealing money and property. Not parading the things one hankers after keeps people’s hearts from becoming a muddle.

Therefore the Sage, in governing the world, empties their hearts so as to take away extravagance, fills their bellies so as to bring them back to plainness, softens their will so as to halt contention, and strengthens their bones so they can stand on their own. He constantly brings it about that people have no crooked cleverness and no appetitive craving; he causes even the quick-witted not to dare engage in fraudulent actions. Simply by calmly carrying out affairs of nonaction, there is then nothing under Heaven that does not become well ordered.

Discourse

The order in which the Great Dao brings things forth is this: **the One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three**. “One” is the Heavenly Dao; “Two” is the Dao of **yin and yang** in mutual opposition; “Three” is the **human Dao**, formed by the union of One and Two—the central pivot of Dao. Hence Chapter 1 expounds Heaven’s Dao; Chapter 2 expounds the Dao of opposition and cyclical reciprocity; this chapter expounds the **human Dao** of **inner sagehood and outer kingship**. The “outer king” must be rooted in the “inner sage”: only with Heavenly virtue can there be royal way; only those who can govern **themselves** can govern **the world**. In ancient times, Emperor Yao harmonized the myriad states entirely by **clearly perfecting august virtue**; Emperor Shun, “Chonghua,” co-ruled by **reverently rectifying himself and facing south**. Therefore, when the Sage governs the world, he takes **self-cultivation** as the root. If he can cultivate himself so that the **heart is empty**, the **belly full**, the **will softened**, and the **bones strengthened**, then the world is governed by **nonaction**.

If the heart is not empty, private desires multiply. If the belly is not full, hunger abounds—Mencius says, “If there is no *this*, there is starvation”; *starvation* here means **not full**. If the will is not softened, people become rash and impetuous. If the bones are not strong, they grow weak and timid. An **empty heart** encompasses the Great Void, with nothing outside it. A **full belly** means a capacity that embraces Heaven and Earth and contains all things (here “belly” means **receptivity**, not stuffing oneself with meat and wine). A **softened will** means yielding and giving way—**the modest gentleman**. **Strong bones** means a robust, upright bearing—**able to shoulder the cosmos, standing between Heaven and Earth**. Emptiness of heart is the consummation of Mencius’s “not moved in heart”—when the heart is already empty, what could still be moved? Fullness of belly is the effect of nourishing the **vast, flooding qi**; such qi can fill Heaven and Earth—hence “fill the belly.” “Softening the will” corresponds to **holding to one’s will** without stubbornness; “strengthening the bones” corresponds to **the back brimming with strength**. When the heart is empty, the will naturally softens; with an empty heart that includes even beyond the heavens, there is no “will” left to insist on. When the belly is full, the bones naturally become strong; the **vast qi** is supremely great and supremely firm.

These four—**empty heart, full belly, softened will, strengthened bones**—are also the workings of the *Great Changes* (the *Yijing*): **Qian** is Heaven, the clear and empty qi; **Kun** is Earth, the broad and thick image—hence **empty vs. full**. Though **Qian** is clear and empty qi, its three lines are unbroken—within it is utmost **solidity**; what is solid calls for emptiness—hence “**empty the heart**.” Though **Kun** is broad and thick, its six lines are broken—within it is utmost **emptiness** ; what is empty calls to be filled—hence “**fill the belly**.” **Li** (Fire) occupies the pre-celestial position of **Qian** and functions on its behalf; but **Li**, being fire, is prone to agitation—hence “**soften the will**.” **Kan** (Water) occupies the pre-celestial position of **Kun** and functions on its behalf; but **Kan**, being water, is lord of softness—hence “**strengthen the bones**.” The subtlety here is beyond reckoning; without **actual practice and experience** one does not know it. If one truly gains experience and then gains position to carry the Dao into action, simply **rectify the root and clear the source**, and those slick clever fellows will bow and bend, no longer daring to play their crafty, scheming tricks. Governing the world then becomes as easy as turning over the hand.

Rulers of later ages, lacking the true Dao-virtue of the sages, took only a **smattering of the surface**: today **select the worthy**, tomorrow **amass wealth**. Commentators often gloss “**hard-to-get goods**” as **rare curios and precious things**—not wrong; but **money** too is hard to get and even more prized. Thus people form **factions**, **puff one another up**, even **purchase reputation with money**; superiors and inferiors **scramble for profit**, **rob** one another, and in the end **become thieves who pierce walls and pry roofs**. Alas—when things have come to this pass, why not return to the **root**?

Chapter 4

Original Text

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Translation

The Dao is a harmonizing hollow; when used, it is never full.

Deep—seeming the ancestor of the myriad beings.

It blunts their sharpness, loosens their tangles, softens its radiance, and blends with their dust.

So limpid—as if it were there.

I do not know whose child it is; it seems to be prior to the Lord-on-High.

Word Notes

- □ **— “harmonizing hollow / central harmony”**: “harmony”; the outflow of the middle, hence a receptive, inexhaustible hollowness.
- □ **— “deep”**: deep and far-reaching.
- □ **— “ancestor”**: progenitor, sovereign source.
- □ **— “to blunt”**: to check, to dull.
- □ **— “sharpness”**: keen, aggressive edge.
- □ **— “to loosen”**: to untie, to unbind.

- □ — **“tangles”**: turmoil, entanglement.
- □ — **“radiance”**: brightness, brilliance.
- □ — **“dust”**: the common, dusty world.
- □ — **“limpid”**: clear, empty, still.
- □ — **“Lord-on-High”**: the ancient high deity.

Chapter Explanation

Although the Dao is supremely empty and supremely without, when it issues forth as a breath of central harmony it yet has effect—pervading the six directions so that there is nowhere it does not reach. It is extremely deep and cannot be fathomed, as though it were the ancestor of the myriad beings. It blunts the keen, competitive spirit; it releases the mind from vexed confusion; it does not display its own brilliance, but mingles with the world’s dust. Limpid and clear, with nothing at all stored up—yet **as if** there were something present. I do not know whose child it is or whence it came; it seems to be prior to the Lord-on-High.

Discourse

This chapter says: the sage who has realized “empty the heart, fill the belly; soften the will, strengthen the bones” takes **emptiness** as his body and **central harmony** as his function. The graph □ is composed of “middle” and “water,” the outflow of the middle; what issues from the middle is harmony. “Dao as chōng” means **central harmony**. The Great Harmony fills Heaven and Earth; it can stand in the place of Heaven and Earth and nourish the myriad beings. Its aspect is deep and vast, beyond words.

Yet it neither relies on its virtue nor claims its merit. Gentle and wholly harmonious, it is like an infant—calm and without desire. To “blend one’s radiance and mix with the dust” is the realm of the sage “greatly transformed,” the “saint who cannot be known.” It is not merely “avoiding sensational display” or “preserving oneself in prudence,” but **embodying the teaching** so as to draw others in. (See *Zhuangzi*, “In the World of Men”: Ju Boyu instructs Yan He in teaching the Crown Prince—“In form, nothing suits like **going along**; in heart, nothing suits like **harmonizing**.”) Guanyin’s “appearing in many bodies to preach” is the same idea.

Many commentators explain this only as “prudent self-preservation.” That is not wrong—but it is only half. Is the sage concerned merely with preserving himself? Limpid and still, beyond anyone’s probing, **his person** seems to stand above the world, while **his spirit** truly surpasses Heaven and Earth. Hence, “I do not know whose child it is; it seems to be prior to the Lord-on-High.”

Plainly, this is Laozi reciting his own résumé: speaking his own Dao and De, sketching his own likeness—vividly painting the status of the **dragon**. Then, with the hedges “or,” “as if,” and “seems,” he returns to now leaping, now diving; now appearing, now hiding—sometimes showing a scale, sometimes a claw—leaving people unable to gauge him.

Daoist texts say Laozi preached for twelve thousand days and transformed his body eighty-one times. I understand how such claims arise, but since the matter touches on the marvelous and ordinary records are insufficient to establish it, I will not press the point. Even if we take Laozi simply as “the Old Master beneath the pillar,” some say he was of the Shang, others of the Zhou; he served as historiographer for many years without leaving notable memorials—he might seem a common fellow. Yet the greatest sage since humankind began—**Confucius**—honored him as master and called him “like a dragon.” After Laozi passed through the Hangu Pass, none knew his whereabouts—surely that, too, is transformation beyond measure.

Chapter 5

Original Text

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Translation

Heaven and Earth are not benevolent; they treat the myriad beings as straw dogs.

The Sage is not benevolent; he treats the common people as straw dogs.

Between Heaven and Earth—is it not like a bellows?

Empty yet not pressed down; when it moves, all the more issues forth.

Many words—often they end in exhaustion; better to keep to the center.

Word Notes

- □□ — **“straw dogs”**: dogs plaited from straw for sacrifice; after use, they are trampled underfoot.
- □□ — **“bellows”**: □ is the smith’s airbag (hollow, without a bottom); □ is its mouth/nozzle.
- □ — **“to be pressed/bent”**: to be forced down or contorted; here, “not pressed down/exhausted.”

- □□ — **“not benevolent”**: not partial or sentimental; letting life-and-death follow nature.
- □□ — **“keep to the center”**: hold to the mean; abide in the middle way.

Chapter Explanation

Heaven and Earth are not benevolent: at times they give life and at times they kill, letting beings follow their own nature, treating them like straw dogs. The Sage is not benevolent: at times he gives and at times he takes away, listening to the people’s nature. What lies between Heaven and Earth is like a bellows: within it is empty yet not pressed down; the more it moves, the more qi issues forth. Saying many things only leads to running out of ways; it is better to keep to the middle way.

Discourse

In this chapter Laozi observes the people and all beings across eras and lands: there is no one who does not live and die, die and live, tossing back and forth, suffering beyond measure—like a mote of dust spinning in space, unable to master itself. Now whirling upward to a height, now dipping down below—up and down without rest. Tracing the root of such suffering, one cannot help returning it to **Heaven and Earth**. People and beings are born of Heaven and Earth: what is born cannot fail to die. That Heaven and Earth **give life** to beings is their **benevolence**; that Heaven and Earth **kill** beings is precisely their **not-benevolence**. Moreover, when it is time to give life, **even bad things** are brought to life—as if cherished to the utmost; when it is time to kill, **even good things** are cut down—as if despised to the utmost. Hence “they treat beings as straw dogs.” The Sage, following Heaven-and-Earth’s naturalness, is likewise so.

But Heaven and Earth do not **intend** to give life or to kill. The principle between Heaven and Earth is a going and a coming, cycling without end. Heaven-and-Earth work **without a heart**; giving life is not **loving** beings, and killing is not **hating** them. One only **cultivates** the standing ones and **overturns** the toppled ones, letting beings follow their own nature. If Heaven and Earth had hearts that **loved** beings, so that there were birth but no death, the transformation of qi would reach an end. Therefore a person must break through all names and sayings, empty the heart and **keep to the center**, transcend Heaven and Earth, and only then avoid being knocked about by fate’s cycles, dragged along with the round of comings and goings.

Laozi foresaw that later students would often **misread** the scriptures and be **bound** by them: splitting into sects and schools; burrowing into phrases; getting stuck on **principles** or **methods**; doing only **mouth-work** and **bookish Dao-and-De**—stodgy and useless. Worse, some fall into **superstition**, unable to be self-reliant and self-mastering: relying on Heaven and Earth, leaning on gods and spirits. They do not know that though Heaven and Earth delight in life, they **cannot protect** a person; though the holy and the buddhas are compassionate, they **cannot save** a

person. Even the teachings of sages, immortals, and buddhas—anything that can be **spoken** or **named**—is but **one-sided** speech, set within **opposition**: where there is an advantage, there is a disadvantage. Hence the Buddha says “inconceivable, unsayable”; hence Confucius’s “I would wish not to speak,” and his teachings on **six sayings and six obstructions**—all the same intent.

Therefore Laozi must reason from the **root**: he **directly** calls Heaven and Earth—and even the Sage—“not benevolent,” in order to break people’s **superstitious dependence**. He says “many words often end in exhaustion” to break people’s **attachment to doctrines and methods**. He says “keep to the center” to point people to their **home**. High indeed! Lofty indeed! Divine and wondrous indeed!

Formerly Śākyamuni preached as **teacher of men and gods**, and it was called a **lion’s roar**. Laozi, by laying bare the workings of Heaven and Earth and the Sage, lifts people **beyond** men-and-gods—how is this not a **dragon’s song**? Yet a **lion’s roar** startles the mountains and easily moves people; a **dragon’s rumble** is subtle and hard to gauge—without an attuned ear, one hears little savor. Thus students of the sutras still prefer to study them; Laozi is not even counted alongside **Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad**. His book is treated like **poison**, looked at with worldly eyes that presume to peer at a great sage whose transformations are beyond measure.

Chapter 6

Original Text

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Translation

The valley-spirit does not die; this is called the Mysterious Female.

The gate of the Mysterious Female—this is the root of Heaven and Earth.

Fine and unbroken, as if abiding; use it, and it does not strain.

Word Notes

- □□ — **“valley-spirit”**: the true spirit of the empty valley.
- □ — **“mysterious”**: true emptiness; deep and beyond measurement.
- □ — **“Female”**: wondrous presence; the generative yin virtue.
- □□ — **“fine and unbroken”**: subtle and unceasing.

Chapter Explanation

The true spirit within the void does not die; this is called the “Mysterious Female,” namely true emptiness and wondrous presence as one.

The “gate of the Mysterious Female” is the portal of this emptiness-and-presence and is the root of Heaven and Earth. If a person would return to the source, one must preserve a fine, continuous sense of “as-if present”: present yet not clung to. Its working is unbusy—used as if not used, its

efficacy is without strain.

Discourse

This chapter sets forth the method of **keeping the center** and the power that proceeds from it. The round of the character □ (“center”) is the shape of a hollow valley; its upper half represents Heaven and its lower half Earth—whenever “Heaven and Earth” are paired, this is the relative, opposed heaven. The vertical stroke through the middle is the **true spirit**. Everyone has this spirit; it is what the *Doctrine of the Mean* calls the true nature endowed by Heaven. Here “Heaven” means the unique Heaven that includes all worlds—the very Heaven Confucius revered. Otherwise, since Dao gives birth to Heaven and Earth and the Buddha is “teacher of Heaven,” for Confucius to revere something beneath them would be an inversion.

Yet in the post-celestial condition, **nature** flows into **feeling**, and feeling into **desire**; then this spirit slants downward and circles within the ring—what Buddhism calls **rebirth**. One must first lessen desire to accord with feeling, then gather feeling back into nature. The central stroke then comes alive and naturally **threads through Heaven and Earth**—this is what Confucius called “one that runs through.” It **opens into the void**, unperishing through the ages, and even so continues to pass through Heaven and Earth, becoming their governor.

Why so? On the left of □ is □ (“mysterious”); when set in motion it is **yang**, the beginning of Heaven and Earth. On the right is □ (“Female”); when set in motion it is **yin**, the mother of beings. The two sides are like a pair of doors; the vertical stroke is the **hinge**. When the hinge turns, **mysterious** and **female** arise; from mysterious and female, Heaven and Earth are born. But once divided as Heaven and Earth, **the gate closes**. The human being—who bears the whole of Dao—is the same. One **must open this gate** so yin and yang may come and go; when they meet, they unite as one body; then the central stroke again fills Heaven and Earth—and rises beyond them.

The work of opening this gate is **“non-acting that yet acts”** and **“acting that yet is non-acting.”** In stillness, let function appear with a single responsive turn—without disturbing the stillness (non-acting that acts). After acting, **return to center**, not burdening yourself with “my merit” (acting that is non-acting). This is precisely Mencius’s “do not forget, do not assist.” Later alchemical writers fixated on concrete forms and pointed to some bodily “pass,” but Laozi’s words are not merely about one anatomical spot. His meaning is broader: to open the **gate of Heaven and Earth** by restoring the **center of the human heart**—able to be empty and receptive, still and responsive—so that “the valley-spirit does not die,” the “fine thread seems to abide,” and “when used, it does not strain.”

Chapter 7

Original Text

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Translation

Heaven is long; Earth is enduring.

The reason Heaven and Earth can be long and enduring is that they do not live for themselves; therefore they can long endure.

Thus the Sage puts himself after, and he ends up in front; he puts himself outside, and his person is preserved.

Is it not because he is without private claims?
Therefore he is able to accomplish his own.

Word Notes

- □□□ **— “do not live for themselves”**: not existing for self, not taking the self as the axis.
- □□□ **— “puts himself after”**: yields, lets others come first.
- □□ **— “ends up in front”**: paradoxical result of yielding.
- □□□ **— “puts himself outside”**: does not center on self-interest or self-preservation.
- □□ **— “person is preserved”**: thereby remains secure.
- □□ **— “without private claims”**: not acting for self alone.

- □□□ **— “accomplish his own”**: in fact perfects his true personal good by not grasping at it.

Chapter Explanation

Heaven lasts and Earth endures. The reason Heaven and Earth can be both long and enduring is that they give life to beings but do not give life to themselves; therefore they can long endure.

Accordingly, the Sage in all things lets others go first—he **puts himself after**, yet his person in fact comes to the fore. He does not scramble for power and profit—he **puts himself outside**, yet his person in fact is preserved. Is it not because he does not act for himself? Precisely because he does not act for himself, he is able to **accomplish** his own true good.

Discourse

This chapter says that Heaven and Earth are born from the **valley-spirit**; while the valley-spirit’s not-dying is not visible to the eye, the long endurance of Heaven and Earth is known to all. If Heaven and Earth endure, we can infer the valley-spirit. And the reason Heaven and Earth endure is that they **give life to the myriad beings without giving life to themselves**. On the face of it, to give life without giving life to oneself ought to mean immediate extinction. But the principle of the space between Heaven and Earth is **cyclical**. Heaven and Earth give birth to beings; once beings are generated, their **primordial qi** returns to Heaven and Earth. Moreover, beings cannot go beyond Heaven and Earth. Thus **when Heaven and Earth give life to beings, they are in fact giving life to themselves**.

If Heaven and Earth did not take the myriad beings as **one body**, but acted **for themselves alone**, they would become a mere, narrow “thing”—unworthy of being called “Heaven and Earth.” The Sage stands side by side with Heaven and Earth in this: **the world is one household; the nations, one person**. By **putting himself after** and **putting himself outside**, he moves with the cycle of Heaven and Earth: what is placed behind rotates to the front and naturally ends up ahead; what is set outside becomes **great without an outside** and endures through the ages.

Otherwise, those who think only of themselves—**grasping for precedence** and **clinging to self-preservation**—provoke in others the desire to destroy them. How, then, could they possibly be first, or preserved?

Chapter 8

Original Text

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Translation

The highest goodness is like water. Water is good at benefiting the myriad beings and does not contend.

It dwells where people disdain to be; therefore it is close to Dao.

In dwelling—be good at the place; in heart—be good at depth; in giving—be good at benevolence; in speech—be good at trust; in governance—be good at order; in affairs—be good at capability; in movement—be good at timing.

Only because it does not contend is it without blame.

Word Notes

- □ **— “to give”**: to bestow, to grant (□□).
- □ **— “blame/fault”**: a lapse or transgression.

Chapter Explanation

The highest form of goodness is like water. Water is good at **benefiting** all beings, yet it does **not** contend with others. It settles in the most lowly places that people dislike; therefore it is **near to Dao**.

A person of highest goodness is, in **dwelling**, good at finding the proper **place**—like water that comes to rest in hollows without choosing the ground. In **heart**, good at **depth**—like water that is hollow and clear. In **giving**, good at **benevolence**—like water that moistens and nourishes living things. In **speech**, good at **trust**—like water that never loses its tendency to flow downward. In **governance**, good at **order**—like water that washes filth away and levels the high and the low. In **work**, good at **capability**—like water that moves through every task. In **action**, good at **timing**—like water that is lively and responsive.

Having all these excellences, it still does **not** contend. Precisely because it does not contend, it is **without blame**.

Discourse

Alas! The world is in decay; the whole globe is at war. Who can count the multitudes slain, or the leagues burned? Trace the illness to its source and it is nothing but the calamity of **competition**—the calamity of **contending for power and rights**. By contending for rights, people in fact **forfeit** their rights—how baffling!

If all nations honored Laozi's teaching—**yielding and not contending**—they would naturally be amicable and at ease; cheerful and flourishing. How, then, would there have been such a disaster as the world has never seen?

Granted, when Laozi teaches people **not to contend**, he is **not** telling them to be pedantic and useless, dependent and weak, sitting still while "natural selection" eliminates them. He merely forbids struggling for **power and profit**, in order to extinguish the wars of ten thousand generations. At the same time he **teaches** people to be **good at benefiting beings, good at place, good at depth, good at benevolence, good at trust, good at order, good at capability, and good at timing**—to possess **exceptional virtue** and **exceptional ability**.

This is **not** to contend over **outward posture**, but to strive for **inner content**; not to contend over **appearance and position**, but to contend in **spirit**. Make **non-contention your contention**; seek **without seeking**, and it is naturally obtained. This learning has a hundred benefits and not a single harm. It is precisely the **right prescription** for today's disease. Why do the peoples of all nations not give it a try?

Chapter 9

Original Text

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Translation

To hold and fill it—better to stop.

To probe and sharpen it—you cannot keep it so for long.

Gold and jade filling the hall—no one can guard them.

Rich and honored, yet haughty—one brings one’s own blame.

Achievement completed, name accomplished, withdraw your person—this is the Dao of Heaven.

Word Notes

- □ **— “to hold”**: to keep/maintain.
- □ **— “to fill/be full”**: to reach fullness, saturation.
- □ **— “to stop”**: to cease, bring to a halt.
- □ **— “to probe”**: to gauge, manipulate, intensify.
- □ **— “sharp”**: keen, acute, aggressive edge.
- □□ **— “keep for long”**: maintain in a lasting way.
- □□□□ **— “no one can guard it”**: cannot be securely kept.

- □ **— “haughty”**: arrogant, self-exalting.
- □ **— “blame”**: misfortune, calamity.
- □□□□□ **— “achievement completed, name accomplished, withdraw”**: do not occupy the credit; step back after success.
- □□□ **— “the Dao of Heaven”**: Heaven’s natural way.

Chapter Explanation

What one holds and pushes to fullness is better stopped before it is full; what one probes and hones to sharpness cannot be kept so for long.

When gold and jade fill one’s halls, they cannot be guarded for long. When a person becomes rich and honored and then grows haughty, he brings calamity upon himself. Therefore, when achievement is complete and reputation is established, one should withdraw and not dwell in the merit—this accords with the Dao of Heaven.

Discourse

This chapter teaches that, in the affairs of Heaven and Earth, whatever reaches **fullness** must necessarily **wane**, and whatever grows **too sharp** must necessarily **snap**. People fail to grasp this and only know to scramble for power and profit, to chase wealth and rank—unaware that wealth and rank not only **cannot** be kept long, but also become the very thing **everyone covets**, the place where **resentments gather**. If, on top of this, one leans on wealth and rank to act **arrogantly**, one all the more calls misfortune down upon oneself.

Hence, when your work is accomplished and your name recognized, **withdraw**. Have, yet do not **own**; do not **swell** with self-satisfaction. Let **merit** stand without **occupying** it; let every trace of **edginess** be gone. Only thus do you accord with the **natural Dao of Heaven**, and only thus can what you have attained endure.

Chapter 10

Original Text

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Translation

Carry the hun and po, and embrace the One—can you keep them from parting?

Concentrate your qi to utmost softness—can you be like an infant?

Wash away and clear the mysterious seeing—can you be without blemish?

Loving the people and governing the state—can you do it by nonaction?

The gate of Heaven opens and closes—can you keep to the feminine (soft)?

Be bright and reach in all directions—can you be without “knowing”?

Give them life and nourish them; give life yet do not possess, act yet do not rely, lead yet do not lord it—this is called mysterious De.

Word Notes

- □ — **“hun (spiritual soul)”**: the animating, subtle spirit.
- □ — **“po (corporeal soul)”**: the bodily essence.
- □□ — **“embrace the One”**: hold to the unitary center.
- □□ — **“concentrate qi”**: focus the breath/energy.
- □□ — **“utmost softness”**: extreme suppleness and yielding.
- □ — **“wash away”**: cleanse.
- □□ — **“mysterious seeing”**: deep, far-reaching vision/inspection.
- □ — **“blemish”**: flaw, defect.
- □□ — **“gate of Heaven”**: the heart, which can connect to Heaven.
- □ — **“feminine”**: soft/yielding stance.
- □□ — **“reach in four directions”**: clear and unimpeded on all sides.
- □ — **“to nourish”**: to rear, to sustain.
- □ — **“to lord it / control”**: to dominate or impose.

Chapter Explanation

When the mind runs outward, the **hun** and **po** part company. To **carry the hun, keep the po, and embrace the One**—can you keep them from separating?

If the qi is let loose, the heart is stirred. To **concentrate the pre-celestial qi** so that it is **supremely soft**, can you be like the **infant’s Great Harmony**?

To **wash away the dust** so that your **mysterious seeing** opens wide—can you be **without blemish**?

Once the body is cultivated, then in **loving the people and governing the state**, can you manage it by **nonaction**?

The **gate of Heaven** can open and close with transformations beyond counting; can you remain in the **feminine/soft**?

In handling affairs, to be **clear and unobstructed on all sides**—can you be **as if without knowing**?

To **give life** to the people and **nourish** the people; to give life yet **not make it your possession**; to act yet **not rely on it**; to stand as their **leader** yet **not lord it over them**—this is what is called **mysterious De**, deep and hard to name.

Discourse

The opening four lines of this chapter are precisely Mencius's teaching on **nourishing qi** and **not letting the heart be moved**—only Laozi does not say "heart," but says **ying** ( ), which he interprets as **hun**. *Hun* is the heart's spirit—hence the sense of "ceaselessly active." *Li* is the post-celestial heart; the **infant** does not lose the **pre-celestial qi**. If one can refrain from using the post-celestial heart and not lose the pre-celestial qi, then one can **wash away the dust**, **open one's vision**, survey up and down, past and present, penetrate mystery and attend to the subtle, without clinging to a single bias.

Thus one is **neither** like those who are unopened and cramped, with "bean-sized" eyesight, drowning in old learning, **nor** like those fettered by materiality, who take only what is seen to exist and what is unseen to be nothing. Therefore one can **love the people and govern the state**, transforming without limit in response to the ten thousand affairs; one is **clear and unimpeded** and not bound by fixed preconceptions.

To **give life and nourish** the world without taking it as one's own; to **do** without leaning on one's doing; to be the **leader** of the people yet not rule them by domination or bind them with laws and penalties—letting the people naturally **wander at ease within Dao and De**—this ineffable **mysterious De** is found, in our land, only in **Yao** and **Shun**, who made the world "common to all"; and, in the West, in **Washington**, who founded a union of states—each worthy of the name without shame.