Chapter 1

Original Text

□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

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.

Revision #6
Created 2025-08-11 10:10:32 UTC by Phil
Updated 2025-08-15 16:29:59 UTC by Phil