

- □ — “**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** (阂) and **marvel** (眇) 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.

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