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.

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