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.

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