

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

- 予 — “**to give**”: to bestow, to grant (予).
- 咎 — “**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?

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