

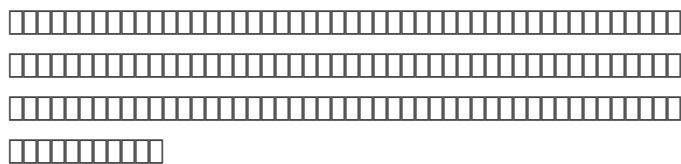
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Chapter 38



Translation

Upper De does not regard itself as De —
and so it truly possesses De.
Lower De never departs from De —
and so it lacks De.

Upper De practices nonaction, with nothing done for a purpose.
Lower De acts, and acts with purpose.
Upper humaneness acts, yet without purpose.
Upper righteousness acts, and acts with purpose.
Upper rites acts, and when no one responds,
it rolls up its sleeves and compels them.

Therefore: lose Dao, and only then comes De;
lose De, and only then comes humaneness;
lose humaneness, and only then comes righteousness;
lose righteousness, and only then come rites.

Now rites are but the thinning of loyalty and trust,
and the forerunner of disorder.
Foreknowledge is the flower of Dao,
and the beginning of folly.

So the great person dwells in the substantial, not the thin;
abides in the fruit, not the flower.
Therefore: discard that and take this.

Word Notes

- 直 — "**righteousness**": Proper measure; what is fitting and due.
- 禮 — "**rites**": The forms and ceremonies that regulate human affairs.
- 忠 — "**loyalty**": Devoting one's whole heart.
- 信 — "**trust**": True sincerity.

- □ — "**flower**": The blossom of a plant — that is, outward display, not the fruit.

Chapter Explanation

A person of upper De does not regard himself as possessing De, and therefore is able to possess De. A person of lower De strains to hold on to his De, and therefore lacks true De. A person of upper De acts without deliberate intention, simply following his nature, and so has no need for purposeful action. A person of lower De acts with deliberate intention, and so engages in purposeful action. A person of upper humaneness practices humaneness, yet without purposeful action. A person of upper righteousness practices righteousness with purposeful action. A person of upper rites practices rites, but the ceremonies are so numerous that no one responds, and so he cannot help but bare his arms and force compliance.

Only after losing Dao does De appear. Only after losing De does humaneness appear. Only after losing humaneness does righteousness appear. Only after losing righteousness do rites appear. Rites are the thinning of loyalty and trust, the beginning of disorder. Those who possess foreknowledge use their cleverness outwardly — this is Dao's outward show. But when brightness reaches its extreme, darkness follows: this is the beginning of folly. Therefore the great person dwells in the substantial and does not dwell in the meager. He stands upon what is real and does not stand upon what is showy. Hence he discards the empty forms of intellect and takes the solid De of loyalty and trust.

Discourse

The Upper Volume speaks broadly of the great Dao, establishing the original source for all that exists, and corresponds in structure with the *Book of Changes*. The Lower Volume speaks in detail of the utmost De, providing the great practical application for governing the state and bringing peace to all under Heaven, and illuminates the various classical texts in mutual correspondence. This chapter is the guiding principle of the Lower Volume.

What is called upper De is precisely what the *Doctrine of the Mean* calls "the utmost De, without sound or scent" — and it is also what the *Great Learning* calls "illuminating luminous De until reaching the utmost good." When luminous De has been illuminated to the point of the utmost good, there is no De left to illuminate. "Being able to illuminate lofty De" and "being able to illuminate luminous De" — these were the efforts of earlier stages. At this point one has become one body with Dao. What De remains to be named?

The natural order of the great Dao's cycle is as follows. Descending five stages from Dao, one arrives at rites. Dao has neither name nor form; it is only when it first stirs to move that the life-giving De appears. Yet this generative impulse lies hidden within, and only when it ceaselessly gives rise to life does it receive the name humaneness. But the creation of beings requires measure and distinction, and measure and distinction constitute righteousness. When righteousness is pressed to its extreme it necessarily becomes strict, and strictness requires ceremonies and adornment — hence rites. This too is a natural order, a progression the sages could not avoid.

But when rites are used to constrain people's hearts, the inevitable corruption is a fondness for empty forms at the expense of true sincerity. Moreover, rites take strictness as their guiding principle. "Heaven above, marsh below" — the distinction between high and low, noble and base, permits not the slightest transgression. When strictness becomes excessive, most people cannot bear it, and resistance arises. Every manner of stratagem and cunning is devised. When people meet one another with cunning, deceptions multiply without end, and all under Heaven grows ever worse.

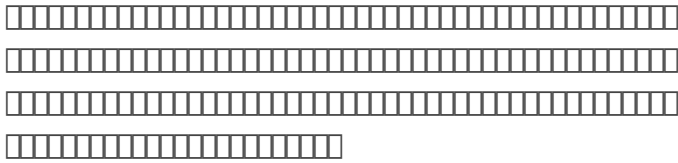
Confucius too, in the *Liyun* passage on the Small Tranquility, says: "And so schemes were employed, and warfare arose from this." But in the passage on the Great Unity he speaks only of "practicing trust and cultivating harmony," without mentioning humaneness, righteousness, rites, or cunning at all. Dao moves in a cycle. From humaneness, righteousness, rites, and cunning, it must turn to trust. Trust is the root of the four sprouts. When one does not speak of humaneness, righteousness, rites, and cunning, true humaneness, righteousness, rites, and cunning are naturally present within it. Trust, moreover, is the fruit of Dao, while rites and cunning are its flower.

In the present age the world is full of deception and guile, and most people say that the human heart has grown too corrupt, embracing pessimism. I, this young student, alone hold to optimism, for I believe that once Dao has flowered it must bear fruit. Where there is falseness there will be sincerity. This is truly the sign that the world of the Great Unity is taking shape.

Laozi's disparagement of humaneness, righteousness, rites, and cunning, and his exaltation of loyalty and trust, speak precisely to the present day. If we examine the history of our nation: the sovereigns of high antiquity were utterly simple and unaffected, plain and practicing nonaction while the people transformed themselves — this was the age of Dao. When Emperor Yao illuminated his lofty De, and Emperor Shun's mysterious De ascended and was heard, and they transformed all under Heaven through De — this was the age of De. Yu the Great tamed the waters, leveled the land, and made the heavens whole, putting resources to use and enriching life — this was the age of Humaneness. Kings Tang and Wu punished tyrants and rescued the people — this was the age of Righteousness. The Duke of Zhou refined and perfected the rites and teachings, bringing culture to its fullest development — this was the age of Rites. From the Zhou dynasty onward, all who governed employed schemes and cunning — this was the age of Cunning. Today the governance and diplomacy of every nation, the arts of the scholar, the farmer, the artisan, and the merchant, have reached the very pinnacle of cunning.

From this day forward, the age of Cunning ends and the age of Trust opens. Once the age of Trust opens, all under Heaven attains the Great Unity. Trust is practiced and harmony is cultivated. Peace endures forever. Nations that lack trust and harmony will weaken. People who lack trust and harmony will not survive. This is the great Dao's course: from seedling to spreading branches, to leaves, to flower, to the full, round, splendid fruit — bringing all people under Heaven to share in blessedness, as a matter of natural course.

Chapter 39



Translation

In ages past, those that attained the One:
Heaven attained the One and so was clear;
Earth attained the One and so was still;
spirits attained the One and so were luminous;
valleys attained the One and so were full;
the myriad beings attained the One and so had life;
lords and kings attained the One and so set all under Heaven right.
All of this flows from the One.

Were Heaven unable to be clear, it would crack;
were Earth unable to be still, it would quake;
were spirits unable to be luminous, they would cease;
were valleys unable to be full, they would run dry;
were the myriad beings unable to live, they would perish;
were lords and kings unable to set things right
yet holding themselves noble and high — they would stumble.

Therefore the noble has the lowly as its root;
the high has the low as its foundation.
This is why lords and kings name themselves
"the orphaned," "the bereft," "the unworthy" —
is this not taking the lowly as one's root? Is it not so?

Therefore: assemble carriage upon carriage, and there is no carriage.
Do not wish to gleam and glitter like jade,
nor to stand aloof and apart like stone.

Word Notes

- 静 — "**still**": Peaceful, tranquil.
- 正 — "**right**": To set right, to make correct.
- 裂 — "**crack**": To split apart.

- ☐ — "**cease**": To stop, to expire.
- ☐ — "**dry up**": To be used up, exhausted.
- ☐ — "**stumble**": To trip and fall.
- ☐ — "**worthy**": Goodness, nourishment. "The unworthy" is a royal self-deprecation.
- ☐ — "**carriage**": A vehicle.
- ☐☐ — "**gleaming and glittering**": Small in appearance; self-precious yet petty.
- ☐☐ — "**aloof and apart**": Not fitting together; self-elevated yet isolated.

Chapter Explanation

In ages past, those that attained the One: Heaven attained the One and so was clear. Earth attained the One and so was tranquil. Spirits attained the One and so were numinous. Mountain valleys attained the One and so were brimming. The myriad beings attained the One and so grew and flourished. Lords and kings attained the One and so were able to set all under Heaven right. That Heaven, Earth, humans, and all beings are able to be clear, tranquil, numinous, brimming, alive, and upright — this all proceeds from the same principle.

Were Heaven not to attain the One, having no means to be clear, it would crack. Were Earth not to attain the One, having no means to be tranquil, it would give way. Were spirits not to attain the One, having no means to be numinous, they would fade. Were mountain valleys not to attain the One, having no means to be brimming, they would run dry. Were the myriad beings not to attain the One, having no means to live, they would perish. Were lords and kings not to attain the One, having no means to rule all under Heaven, yet still occupying the lofty seat of honor, they would stumble.

Therefore the noble must not consider itself noble, but take the lowly as its root. The high must not consider itself high, but take the low as its foundation. This is why lords and kings call themselves "the orphaned," "the bereft," and "the unworthy." Is this not taking the lowly as one's root? Is it not so?

In all affairs under Heaven, one must combine many lowly elements to form what is noble — just as a carriage must combine wheels, shafts, crossbars, and canopy to become a carriage. Try to combine several complete carriages, and you cannot form a single carriage. Therefore lords and kings must not aggrandize or elevate themselves; only then can they set all under Heaven right. One must not desire to gleam and glitter like jade — prizing oneself yet actually being petty — nor to stand aloof like stone — elevating oneself yet actually being isolated.

Discourse

Confucius said, "My Dao is threaded through by one thing." The One is the great substance of Dao, and therefore Heaven, Earth, humans, spirits, and the myriad beings cannot afford to lose it. This "One" means pure and undivided — nothing else.

Clear and abiding above, covering all things without exception: this is Heaven's One. Tranquil and abiding below, bearing all things without exception: this is Earth's One. Pervading all beings,

leaving nothing untouched, present everywhere: this is the One of the spirits. Empty and open, receiving all things without exception: this is the One of the mountain valleys. Ceaselessly revolving in its cycles, giving rise to life without end: this is the One of the myriad beings.

If Heaven and Earth and the myriad beings can all attain the One, then human beings — the most luminous of the myriad beings, the very heart of Heaven and Earth — and lords and kings, the exemplars of all the people, must guard the One all the more. For lords and kings, guarding the One simply means being like Heaven in covering all things without exception, like Earth in bearing all things without exception, like spirits in being present everywhere, like valleys in receiving all things without exception, and like the myriad beings in ceaselessly giving rise to life. Pure and undivided, and nothing else.

But if they aggrandize and elevate themselves, looking down upon all others, making no distinction between right and wrong, crooked and straight, and only distinguishing noble from base, high from low — how could they ever set all under Heaven right?

Chapter 40



Translation

Reversal is how Dao moves;
yielding is how Dao works.
All things under Heaven are born from being;
being is born from nonbeing.

Word Notes

- 反 — "**reversal**": Going to the opposite; turning back. Contains both "return to the root" and "things reverse when they reach the extreme."

Chapter Explanation

What runs contrary to Dao is precisely the impulse that sets Dao in motion. What is yielding and uncontenting is precisely the way Dao functions. All things under Heaven are born from being. Being and nonbeing are opposites — yet being itself is born from nonbeing.

Discourse

Reading this chapter, I cannot help but dance for joy, crying out in wild elation: "Now at last it shall be well! The great Dao shall prevail from this day forward! All under Heaven shall have peace at last!"

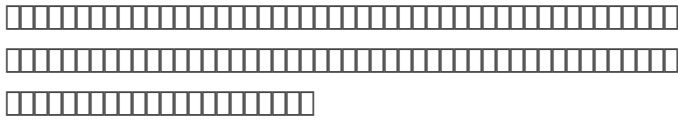
How can I say this? For these several decades, the hearts of the people under Heaven, and the discourse of society at large, have been running almost entirely contrary to Dao. But the more they run contrary to Dao, the greater the movement of Dao. When yin reaches its extreme, yang is born; when chaos reaches its extreme, order follows. This is the universal law of the cosmos, in which all things revolve in mutual cycles. It is like the eleventh month, when the cold reaches its bitterest extreme — the very opposite of warmth. Yet at precisely that moment a single yang returns, and gradually spring comes back. The warm, harmonious breath of yang begins to stir from this moment of greatest opposition. The seasons of Heaven work this way, and the affairs of humankind work this way too.

Mencius said: "When Heaven is about to confer a great charge upon a person, it first makes bitter his heart and will, wearies his sinews and bones, starves his body and flesh, impoverishes his

person, and confounds his every undertaking." This is precisely the going contrary spoken of here. And it is precisely because things go contrary that a person's heart is stirred, his forbearance strengthened, and he gains abilities he never had before. Were there no opposition, no rival states and external threats, the state itself would perish.

Seeing this, all who champion Dao and De and seek to set all under Heaven right: when you encounter resistance, you must not only refrain from vexation — you should rejoice! You must not only refrain from slackening and retreat — you should advance with vigor! Yet even as you advance with vigor, you must truly dwell in yielding and lowliness, contending with no one. Seek within, not without. Seek in nonbeing, not in being. Where there is inner reality, the outer follows. Where there is nonbeing, being arises from it. Naturally, without seeking, it is attained; without acting, it is accomplished. The great Dao can naturally prevail, and all under Heaven can naturally have peace.

Chapter 41



Translation

The high scholar hears of Dao and at once lives it.
The middle scholar hears of Dao and half holds on, half lets go.
The low scholar hears of Dao and laughs out loud —
if it were not laughed at, it would not be worthy of Dao.

So the ancient masters had a saying:

The bright Dao seems dark;
the forward Dao seems to fall back;
the smooth Dao seems rough.

The highest De seems like a hollow valley;
great purity seems stained;
vast De seems never quite enough;
steadfast De seems easy, almost lazy;
what is true and straight seems to shift and bend.

The greatest square has no corners;
the greatest vessel takes longest to complete;
the greatest music has the most silence in it;
the greatest form has no shape at all.

Dao hides itself, without a name —
yet Dao alone is good at lending to all things
and bringing each one to completion.

Word Notes

- 忘 — "**forgotten**": To be lost, to vanish.
- 立 — "**established**": To set up, to found. "Established sayings" means ancient maxims.
- 怠 — "**lax**": Idle, negligent, perfunctory. Not "stealing" but the classical sense of appearing indolent or easygoing.
- 易 — "**changeable**": To alter, to shift.
- 角 — "**corner**": An angle, an edge.

- □ — **"lending"**: To lend, to loan. Dao lends its qi to the myriad beings; when their life is complete, the qi returns to Dao.

Chapter Explanation

The upper scholar hears of Dao and immediately puts it into practice. The middle scholar hears of Dao and sometimes practices it, sometimes does not. The lower scholar hears of Dao and bursts out laughing. If the lower scholar did not laugh, it would not be sufficient to count as Dao.

Those who established teachings in ancient times spoke of this: the one bright in Dao is inwardly lucid, but outwardly simple and unpolished, appearing dim. The one who advances in Dao is inwardly vigorous, but outwardly contends with no one, appearing to retreat. The most marvelous Dao, unseen to the eye, outwardly blends its light and mingles with the dust, appearing no different from ordinary people. One who possesses upper De is humble and self-abasing, like an empty valley receiving all things. One of great whiteness still emerges from the mud, appearing soiled. One of broad De does not consider himself possessed of De, appearing insufficient. One who can build De is quiescent and practices nonaction, appearing idle and negligent. One who is solid in truth follows his nature without clinging, appearing changeable and inconstant. The greatest square is square within but does not put on airs — it has no sharp edges. The greatest vessel is not made in haste, and so is completed last. The greatest music is like the sounds of nature, rare and sparse. The greatest image is like the Ultimateless, without visible form. True Dao is most hidden, without name or appearance.

Therefore the lower scholar, not knowing, laughs. Yet even though he laughs, only Dao is good at lending its qi to the myriad beings and bringing them to completion. The myriad beings are born by borrowing Dao's qi, and when their lives are complete, they return the qi to Dao.

Discourse

Ordinary people despise what is plain and common and marvel at what is strange and miraculous. But all that is strange and miraculous amounts to no more than technique. It cannot govern a state or bring peace to all under Heaven. Only the great Dao is utterly even and utterly ordinary, unchanged through all the ages. Though even and ordinary, it never sinks to the level of the vulgar. Therefore it is difficult to win people's belief, and harder still to move them to practice it.

Among Confucius's disciples, only Yan Hui diligently practiced it, "for three months never departing from humaneness." The rest were in the state of "sometimes keeping it, sometimes losing it — reaching it now and then for a day or a month, and no more." Beyond them, the people of the world either laughed at Confucius as pedantic or laughed at him as old-fashioned. Those with a smattering of understanding laughed at Confucius for not guarding his own reputation or for not reading the times. Because Confucius harbored profound depths within, those who never found the gate could not enter. They never saw the splendor and abundance of the ancestral halls and the hundred offices, and so they mocked.

Yet one who truly possesses Dao follows his nature and acts, heedless of whether others laugh or not. When Dao prevails, Heaven and Earth settle into their proper places and the myriad beings flourish, and all people under Heaven receive its blessings without even knowing it. Whether others laugh or do not laugh — what does it matter?

Chapter 42



Translation

Dao gives birth to the One;
the One gives birth to Two;
Two gives birth to Three;
Three gives birth to the myriad beings.

The myriad beings carry yin on their backs
and hold yang in their arms;
the settling breath between them makes harmony.

What all people scorn —
"the orphaned," "the bereft," "the unworthy" —
yet these are the titles kings and lords claim for themselves.

So it is with all things:
diminish them, and they grow;
add to them, and they diminish.

What others have taught, I too teach:
"Those who are violent and overbearing
do not come to a natural end."
I take this as the sovereign principle of my teaching.

Word Notes

- 負 — "**carry on the back**": To bear upon one's shoulders.
- 損 — "**diminish**": To reduce, to decrease.
- 益 — "**gain**": To increase, to benefit.
- 垂 — "**descending**": Hanging down, settling downward. This is JXZ's non-standard gloss; standard readings interpret the character as surging or rushing together.
- 主 — "**sovereign principle**": Ruler, master, governing authority. JXZ glosses this as equivalent to "sovereign." Thus "the sovereign principle of my teaching" means the ruling maxim. Standard readings take it as "father of my teaching" or "foundation."

Chapter Explanation

Dao gives birth to the single breath of primordial void. This single breath divides into two, giving birth to yin and yang. Yin and yang combine to give birth to the Three Powers — Heaven, Earth, and the Human. The Three Powers give birth to the myriad beings. The myriad beings all carry yin on their backs and hold yang in their arms. Yin and yang settle and descend, generating the breath of Supreme Harmony.

In all affairs, the lower serves as the higher. What people despise most — "the orphaned," "the bereft," "the unworthy" — these are the lowest terms of all, yet kings and lords take them as their own titles. Therefore: diminish something, and it may actually benefit; increase something, and it may actually suffer harm. This is the principle that humility invites benefit and self-satisfaction invites loss.

What the ancients used to teach, I too teach: the violent and overbearing will surely not die a natural death. I shall take this as the sovereign principle of my teaching.

Discourse

The Buddhist scriptures say: "Ignorance trembles, and suddenly there appear mountains, rivers, and the great earth." Indeed, Heaven, Earth, human beings, and all things are born from the deluded stirrings of the great Dao. Human beings, born endowed with these deluded stirrings, find that their qi easily soars upward and their natures easily incline toward ambition and the love of strength.

Yet when qi soars, it scatters. When one's nature runs to ambition and force, it is damaged. Therefore the teaching of the sages is to make what soars settle back down, and to make what is ambitious and forceful dwell in humility and lowliness — so that one may return to the pre-celestial. This and nothing else.

Chapter 43



Translation

The softest thing under Heaven
rides sovereign through the hardest under Heaven.
What has no substance passes through where there is no opening.
From this I know the value of nonaction.

The teaching that needs no words,
the gain that comes through not-doing —
few things under Heaven can touch them.

Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**gallop through**": To drive and command; to move at will.

Chapter Explanation

The softest thing under Heaven can drive and command the hardest thing under Heaven. That which has nothing at all can enter where there is no gap. From this one knows the benefit of nonaction. The teaching without words, the benefit of nonaction — few under Heaven can match them.

Discourse

The hardest things under Heaven can all be shattered. The most substantial things can all decay. Moreover, what is hard is necessarily heavy and cannot set all things in motion. What is substantial is necessarily solid and cannot accommodate all things. Only the softest thing can not only set all things in motion but overcome anything whatsoever. Only that which has no substance at all can not only accommodate all things but be present everywhere without exception. From this one can see that the benefits of softness, weakness, emptiness, and nonbeing are exceedingly great. One need only learn to be soft, weak, empty, and without substance — and that is enough.

Chapter 44



Translation

Fame or the self — which is more dear?

The self or wealth — which carries greater weight?

Getting or losing — which is the real affliction?

Therefore: to love too fiercely is to spend yourself dry.

To hoard without measure is to invite heavy loss.

Know contentment, and disgrace cannot touch you.

Know when to stop, and danger will not find you.

This is the way to last.

Word Notes

- 耗 — "**expenditure**": Exhaustion, depletion of energy and spirit.

Chapter Explanation

People mostly love fame. But fame and the self — which is more dear? People mostly covet wealth. But the self and wealth — which counts for more? People mostly take gaining as glory and losing as affliction. Yet they do not realize that one must first lose and only then can one gain. Gain and loss — which is truly the affliction? Therefore, one who excessively loves fame will surely deplete their spirit and energy. One who greedily hoards wealth will surely invite the resentment of many and suffer heavy loss. Only by knowing contentment and not making reckless demands can one avoid disgrace. Only by knowing when to stop and not greedily grasping can one avoid danger. Only then can one long endure.

Discourse

People in the world jostle and scramble, rushing about in toil and labor, for no purpose other than seeking fame and profit — for no purpose other than chasing great renown and fat advantage. Moreover, it is human nature to rejoice at getting fame and profit and to grieve at losing them. They do not realize that seeking fame invariably exhausts the spirit and injures the body. Seeking profit by wagering one's body to make a fortune is just the same. "Act on profit and you invite much resentment" — getting much profit inevitably brings danger. Getting great fame invites the

jealousy and destruction of others — it is just the same. Fame and profit are both things external to the self. If in seeking fame and profit one damages the self, then which is more dear? Which is the real affliction? Which carries greater weight? Which less?

Furthermore, wherever there is getting, there is losing. Why calculate the two? Getting actually comes from losing — one must first lose before one can gain. Take even a blade of grass or a mustard seed — the very smallest of things — one must still use one's eyes to look at it, bend down, and pick it up by hand before one can obtain it. Though one gains it, one's eyesight and energy have already been spent. Take something worth a single coin — the cheapest of things — one must still spend money before one can buy it. Though one gains it, one's money has already been spent. Even for the smallest and cheapest things, one must inevitably first lose and only then gain. For great and precious things, how much more so.

Therefore, among all affairs between Heaven and Earth, nothing can be gained without cost. What is there to rejoice about in getting? What is there to grieve about in losing? The noble person is at ease and self-content, and thereby breaks free from getting and losing. The petty person is anxious, bitter, and tormented, precisely because of fretting over getting and losing — fretting about not getting, fretting about losing what one has. They do not know that getting does not come from seeking, and that losing cannot be averted by fretting. Only by rising above getting and losing, and fulfilling one's Heaven-given duty as a human being, will it naturally come about that one first parts with things and afterward harvests, gains without seeking to gain, and — what is more — once gained, it is gained forever and never lost through ten thousand ages.

Consider Confucius in his day: he harbored the aspiration of giving peace to the old, being trusted by friends, and cherishing the young — the aspiration of saving all under Heaven for ten thousand generations. He traveled through the states, and in his entire life never achieved his ambitions. Some said he was like a stray dog with no home. Some called him impractical and out of touch. Some said, "How he has declined!" Some asked, "Why is he so restlessly bustling?" His reputation had been lost. He resigned his post as Minister of Justice in Lu and departed; in every state he visited he held no office. He lived his whole life in hardship and poverty — his salary and profit were lost.

Yet precisely because he lost fame and profit, he gained the great name of Model for Teachers of Ten Thousand Generations, the name of one the like of whom has never existed since the birth of humankind. He gained the enduring benefit of sacrificial vessels honored for a thousand autumns, offerings enjoyed in the ancestral temple, and posterity preserving his legacy. Looking back at those rulers of the various states who in their day gained fame and gained profit — they have all, on the contrary, lost everything.

Confucius, of course, had no intention of seeking fame or profit. Yet where there is substance, there will be reputation. Where there is De, there will be emolument. Seeing it this way, one need only pursue substance and cultivate great De — and that is enough. Why insist on seeking fame and profit? Why insist on calculating getting and losing?

Chapter 45



Translation

Great accomplishment seems incomplete —
yet its use is never worn away.
Great fullness seems hollow —
yet its use is inexhaustible.
Great straightness seems bent.
Great skill seems clumsy.
Great eloquence seems halting.
Restlessness overcomes cold;
stillness overcomes heat.
Clarity and stillness set all under Heaven right.

Word Notes

- 缺 — "**lacking**": Deficient, incomplete.
- 空 — "**empty**": Hollow, void.
- 拙 — "**clumsy**": Dull, unskilled.
- 辩 — "**eloquence**": Disputation, argumentation.
- 讷 — "**halting**": Reticent, not speaking much.
- 躁 — "**agitation**": Urgency, restlessness.

Chapter Explanation

One who has great accomplishment instead seems to have deficiencies — yet the function of his work is never worn away. One who has great fullness instead seems empty — yet the function of his fullness is never exhausted. One who is greatly straight instead seems bent. One who has great skill instead seems clumsy and dull. One who has great eloquence instead seems halting. Yet what is held within will naturally prevail outwardly. Cold and heat are external weather. One who is inwardly agitated can overcome cold — though it is cold, one does not feel cold. One who is inwardly still can overcome heat — though it is hot, one does not feel hot. Therefore, clarity and stillness — nonaction — naturally set all under Heaven right of itself.

Discourse

In general, all who accomplish something truly great leave no visible trace, as though they had accomplished nothing. Consider Confucius: he gathered the great achievements of all the sages into one — this was a great accomplishment indeed. And yet he transmitted but did not originate, as though he had accomplished nothing. His *De* matched Heaven and Earth; his learning spanned antiquity and the present — this was fullness in the highest degree. And yet in every matter he said, "What do I really have?" — as though he were utterly empty. His meeting with Nanzi and his meeting with Yang Huo were instances of great straightness seeming bent. His being broadly learned yet claiming no specialty to make his name — this was great skill seeming clumsy. He edited the *Odes* and the *Documents*, established the *Rites* and the *Music*, and compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Where principle could not be explained to others, he did not argue with them. And yet a hundred generations later, without any argument, it became clear of itself. Is not the power of nonaction immeasurably great? Why do people not learn from this?

Chapter 46



Translation

When all under Heaven walks the Dao,
war-horses are turned to the fields to haul dung.
When all under Heaven has lost the Dao,
war-horses are bred on the open frontier.

No crime is greater than kindling desire in others.
No calamity is greater than not knowing when enough is enough.
No fault is greater than the hunger to take.

Therefore: to know that enough is enough — this is the only sufficiency that lasts.

Word Notes

- □ — "**war**": Military, pertaining to arms.
- □ — "**borderlands**": The open country beyond the walls, the wilds.
- □ — "**fault**": Blame, transgression.

Chapter Explanation

When all under Heaven possesses Dao and there is peace, war-horses are retired and used only to haul manure for the fields. When all under Heaven lacks Dao and there is disorder, war-horses are bred and mustered on the borderlands. Among the crimes that invite military calamity, none is greater than being unable to stand on one's own and thereby arousing the covetousness of others. Among the calamities of upheaval, none is greater than that wrought by the rapacious and greedy who do not know contentment. Among the faults that lead to war and slaughter, none is greater than the desire to seize the land and property of others. Therefore, only those who know contentment can have lasting contentment and cease to contend.

Discourse

I, this young student, once read *On Evolution* and encountered its doctrine that the superior triumph and the inferior fall, the strong devour the weak. I was deeply unconvinced. In my own

judgment, the superior ought to educate the inferior, teaching them until they too become superior. The strong ought to protect the weak, nurturing them until they too become strong. Granted, the inferior and weak are in a position where they may be defeated and devoured. But if one takes the larger view, all people under Heaven are brethren. If a brother is inferior, shall we defeat him? If a brother is weak, shall we devour him? Is this not utterly lacking in humane principle? Is it not exceedingly cruel?

Moreover, the people of the world cannot possibly be all alike. Even in the world's most civilized nations, the level of their citizens cannot be uniform. Not only can the citizens of an entire nation not be uniform — even within a single school, where the students are the same age, the geography and customs are the same, and the education they receive is the same, their levels will inevitably vary in superiority and inferiority, strength and weakness. If we follow this logic, must the superior expel the inferior? Must the strong devour the weak?

Some will say that the citizens of civilized nations practice civic virtue and patriotism, and would never massacre one another. If they indeed practice civic virtue, then why do they still annihilate and swallow up the nations of others? To love only one's own nation is still private virtue — it cannot count as civic virtue. Even if one concedes it as civic virtue, it is only a small civic virtue, not the great civic virtue of all under Heaven. Only loving all under Heaven counts as great civic virtue. Nor does this mean abandoning one's own nation to love others — one need only extend the heart that loves one's nation to love all under Heaven, and that suffices.

If one truly loves all under Heaven, one will not only refrain from annihilating and devouring the inferior and weak, but will actively enlighten and protect them. The superior and strong are like the elder and the advanced student; the inferior and weak are like the junior and the beginning student. The beginning student and the younger brother enjoy the good fortune of the advanced student and the elder brother; the advanced student and the elder brother receive the support of the beginning student and the younger brother. Loving all under Heaven is precisely the way to love one's own nation. And all under Heaven can then enjoy everlasting peace.

If, on the contrary, one follows that evolutionary doctrine, then at first the superior and strong compete against the inferior and weak, and naturally the inferior and weak are annihilated and devoured. But after the inferior and weak have been annihilated, the superior and strong must turn to competing against each other. In this competition, new divisions of superior and inferior, strong and weak, emerge, and once again some are annihilated and devoured. The competition never ceases; the annihilation never stops. Not only will nations be unable to endure, but humanity itself will be unable to survive — the evolution will have run its course until only a single person remains.

My Asia, from the beginning of the Zhou dynasty to the era of powerful Qin, provides the evidence of the past. At the beginning of the Zhou, the Central Land had some eight hundred states. During the Eastern Zhou, the various states competed against one another, and the inferior and weak were swallowed up by the superior and strong, gradually declining to several dozen states, then gradually to seven, and at last to powerful Qin alone. Yet the peoples of the swallowed states would not resign themselves to their fate. They rose up together and destroyed the house of Qin. Fortunately the Founder of the Han was magnanimous and broad-minded, treated others with generosity, and made a covenant with the people in three simple articles of law, abolishing all the

harsh statutes, and thereby brought the wars of all under Heaven to rest. Otherwise, had the competition continued without end, would my Central Land not have been emptied of people long ago?

My nation declined from the Han dynasty onward because of the dynastic system of private empire and the policy of keeping the people ignorant. This was not a consequence of failing to compete — it was a result of the abuses of autocratic governance. Therefore I have never agreed with the evolutionary theorists.

Now, as I annotate the *Dao De Jing* and come to this chapter, when I read the words "No crime is greater than kindling desire," I realize that Laozi in his day also had a theory of evolution — and moreover I come to understand that the ancient sages who originated the evolutionary theory did so to illuminate the stakes, to awaken the inferior and weak, to teach them to strive and advance, to stand strong on their own, so that they might ride abreast with the world's powers, that civilization might flourish, and that equality and freedom might prevail. This, too, was a hard-won aspiration of the evolutionary theorists. They were by no means reinforcing the arrogance of powerful nations or teaching monkeys to climb trees. Alas, the rapacious nations seized upon this doctrine. Without waiting for the inferior and weak to awaken and evolve, they swallowed them up at once. This was of course the brutality and inhumanity of the rapacious nations — but it was also because the evolutionary theorists, though well-intentioned, stated their case too partially, presenting only one side, and inevitably gave rise to great abuses.

The ancients said, "A single word can ruin a state." Has not this doctrine done more than ruin states?

Consider now how Laozi stated his case: from all four directions and all eight sides, covering every aspect without omission. He composed both a theory of evolution and a theory of heavenly principle. His theory of evolution rebukes the inferior and weak for their inability to stand on their own: having people yet not knowing to educate them, having land yet not knowing to defend it, having raw materials yet not knowing to extract and manufacture them — seductive adornment invites licentiousness, careless storage invites theft — kindling the covetousness of powerful neighbors and provoking military calamity is the gravest of crimes. His theory of heavenly principle rebukes the superior and strong for their rapacious insatiability, their ceaseless grasping and seizure, their fattening of themselves at others' expense, their destruction of the principles of justice — this is the gravest of faults. And finally he admonishes the strong nations to rid themselves of covetousness, to know when enough is enough and cease contention, so that all under Heaven may be at peace — so that soldiers need not stand perpetually on the frontier killing one another, and horses can be put to the peaceful work of hauling dung for the fields, and everyone may devote themselves to practical enterprise, and resources will naturally suffice.

I venture to ask the humane and worthy of the world to judge this impartially. Laozi's words are such that when pressed forward they are never excessive, and when held back they leave ample room. How supremely balanced and peaceful they are! How perfectly rounded and thorough!

Chapter 47



Translation

Without stepping through the door,
one knows all under Heaven.
Without peering through the window,
one sees the Dao of Heaven.
The farther one ventures out,
the less one knows.

And so the Sage knows without journeying,
perceives without looking,
and brings all things to completion without striving.

Word Notes

- 門 — "**door**": The door of one's dwelling.
- 窗 — "**window**": The window.
- 越 — "**the more... the more**": Increasingly, ever more.

Chapter Explanation

Without going out the door, one can know the affairs of all under Heaven. Without peering out the window, one can perceive the Dao of Heaven. Ordinary people, the farther they venture out, the less they know. Therefore the Sage, without journeying, knows all principles. Without looking, he discerns the names of all things. Without acting, he can accomplish all things.

Discourse

Confucius said to Zigong: "Do you think of me as someone who has learned many things and memorized them all?" Zigong replied, "Yes — is that not so?" Confucius said, "No. I have one thread that runs through it all." This is because Dao gives birth to the myriad beings — it is of one root. If one grasps this one thread and knows the source of all that exists, then the myriad beings are known without seeking to know them.

Otherwise, if one seeks knowledge from the branches and leaves, even if one researches for ten thousand upon ten thousand years and expends an immeasurable amount of spirit and energy, one

will still be unable to discover the ultimate reason of things. And inevitably, the more one researches, the less one perceives and knows. This is because one takes what one perceives and knows to be real, and what one does not perceive and know to be nonexistent. Yet the things of the world — some have form, some are formless; they shift and transform in a thousand ways, ten thousand variations, defying prediction. To cling fixedly to perception and knowledge alone — is this not exceedingly narrow?

In former times, Confucius knew the rites of the Yin and the rites of the Xia; he knew the events of a hundred generations to come. Yet he did not arrive at this through the study of historical records, for the states of Qi and Song lacked sufficient documents and scholars. He knew the shangyang, the one-legged rain-bird; the pingshi, the giant aquatic fruit; the Sushen arrows, flint-tipped shafts of the Sushen people; and the Fangfeng bones, the giant skeletal remains of the Fangfeng clan. Yet none of this was arrived at through the methods of physical science.

Mencius said: "The heavens are so high, the stars and constellations so remote — yet if one seeks the underlying principle, the solstice a thousand years hence can be calculated while sitting." Yet this, too, was not worked out through specialized astronomy or by calculation with a telescope.

The Buddha gazed upon the vast cosmos of three thousand great-thousand worlds as though it lay in the palm of his hand. Yet neither was this achieved through ocean voyages and expeditions, nor through the use of a telescope.

All of this is because the Sage has grasped the root source. The myriad beings all return to him. All that exists lies within one's own nature. What need is there to venture out and look?

Chapter 48



Translation

In the pursuit of learning, one gains day by day.
In the pursuit of Dao, one sheds day by day.
Shedding and shedding again,
until nothing remains to be done.
Through nothing remaining to be done, nothing is left undone.
Therefore one who would win all under Heaven
does so always through effortless engagement.
When one resorts to contrivance,
it is not enough to win all under Heaven.

Word Notes

- See Word Notes for Chapter 40 (,) and Chapter 42 (,) for terms repeated here.

Chapter Explanation

In the pursuit of learning, one must daily increase one's knowledge. In the pursuit of Dao, one must daily strip away one's perceptions and preconceptions. Strip them away again and again, until one has no perceptions or preconceptions at all, becoming one body with Dao. Acting through nonaction, one is then able to leave nothing undone. Therefore, when the Sage wins all under Heaven, he constantly employs the principle of acting as though there were nothing to do. When he resorts to deliberate contrivance, on the contrary, it is not enough to win all under Heaven.

Discourse

The preceding chapter explained the wondrous function of Dao. But one may worry that people who have not yet attained that level of cultivation will simply lapse into dead emptiness and end up inert and unresponsive, utterly useless — like a clay or wooden puppet. Therefore the text follows immediately with this: in the pursuit of learning, one must daily renew and renew again, study and practice regularly, learn broadly and inquire widely. From breadth, one then returns to the essential; from the myriad particularities, one returns again to the single root. When the time comes to cultivate Dao, one can then strip away perceptions, preconceptions, names, and appearances, preserving only the primal principle. Strip away and strip away again, returning to

emptiness and nonbeing. From emptiness and nonbeing, wondrous existence arises. One knows nothing, yet there is nothing one does not know. One can do nothing, yet there is nothing one cannot do. Even something as vast as all under Heaven can be taken up with a laugh and a bow, without committing a single unjust act or killing a single innocent person. If even winning all under Heaven can be accomplished this way, how much more so everything else — that goes without saying.

(This speaks in the most extreme terms of Dao's wondrous function. It does not mean the Sage harbors a desire to seize all under Heaven.)

Chapter 49



Translation

The Sage has no fixed heart —
he takes the heart of the hundred families as his own.

Those who are good, I meet with goodness.
Those who are not good, I also meet with goodness.
Thus De perfects itself as goodness.

Those who are trustworthy, I meet with trust.
Those who are not trustworthy, I also meet with trust.
Thus De perfects itself as trust.

The worthy one moves through the world watchful and apprehensive,
gathering all hearts into his own.
The hundred families fix their eyes and ears upon him —
and he cherishes them all as his children.

Word Notes

- 卮 — **"all caution and concern"**: Fearful, apprehensive.

Chapter Explanation

The Sage has no fixed heart — he takes the heart of the hundred families as his own heart. Among the hundred families, those who are good, he treats well, guiding them onward. Those who are not good, he also treats well, coaxing and shepherding them along. In this way, one can bring goodness to all under Heaven and perfect one's great De of goodness. Among the hundred families, those who are trustworthy, he meets with trust. Those who are not trustworthy, he also meets with trust. In this way, when those above value trust, the people will all become trustworthy, and one perfects one's great De of trust. The Sage, in the world, is all caution and apprehension, fearing that the divisions between self and other among the people run too deep for harmony. Therefore, for all the world, he merges his heart with theirs, eliminating the marks of distinction. The hundred families all fix their eyes and ears on scrutinizing who is good and who is not, who is trustworthy and who is not. But the Sage treats all the people of the world as children — no matter what, he delights in them.

Discourse

The world knows more times of strife than of peace. On the small scale, this person cannot get along with that person. On the large scale, this nation contends with that nation. If we trace this disease to its root, it is always because ego-attachment runs too deep — knowing only the self, not knowing others — so that people cannot live in harmony. At first they wage war with tongues and pens. In the end it comes to guns and cannons. And once they contend with guns and cannons, the cruelty becomes extreme. By that point, even binding them with public law and governing them with penal statutes can only treat the exterior but not the interior, and can rescue the moment but not the future.

Therefore the Sage resolves the matter at the root.

Confucius said: "No presuppositions, no certainties, no rigidities, no self."

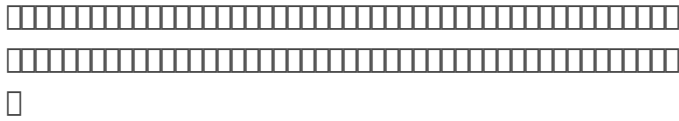
The Buddha said: "No mark of person, no mark of self, no mark of being, no mark of life-span."

Jesus said: "Love those who are your enemies; treat with goodness those who assail you."

All of these share the same purport as this chapter of Laozi.

As for the Patriarch of Islam, who said that the Lord practices goodness and forgiveness — this too accords with the meaning of this chapter, which teaches us to cherish all people of the world as children. When children are well-behaved, of course one delights in them. When children cause mischief, one delights in them just the same. Raise them up, educate them gradually, and in time they will turn out well. When this is so, what boundary between self and other remains? Is this not all under Heaven as one family, ten thousand states as one person?

Chapter 50



Translation

Emerging into life, entering into death.

Three in ten are companions of life;

three in ten are companions of death.

Three in ten, though alive, move toward the ground of death — drawn there by their own hand.

Why is this so?

Because they feed life too richly.

I have heard that one who is skilled at tending life

walks the open land without meeting rhinoceros or tiger,

passes through armies without need of shield or blade.

The rhinoceros finds no place to drive its horn,

the tiger finds no place to set its claws,

the blade finds no place to lodge its edge.

Why is this so?

Because in him there is no ground where death can reach.

Word Notes

- □ — "**companions; category**": A class or type of people.
- □ — "**to preserve; to maintain**": To hold together, to safeguard.
- □ — "**overland; level ground**": Flat, open terrain.
- □ — "**rhinoceros**": A fierce beast, paired with the tiger as an exemplar of mortal danger.
- □ — "**to avoid; to dodge**": To evade, to shy away from.
- □ — "**blade; cutting edge**": The edge of a weapon.

Chapter Explanation

Everything under Heaven that emerges into life must inevitably enter into death. Children who are in the midst of growth constitute three out of ten. The elderly who are approaching death constitute three out of ten. Those in their middle years whose vital energy still flourishes but who gradually shift toward the ground of death — they too constitute three out of ten. Why do these middle-aged people shift toward the ground of death? Because they have developed cravings and

desires: savoring fine food, delighting in beautiful appearances, indulging themselves too lavishly. Moreover, in scheming for clothing, food, and shelter to nourish their lives, they exhaust and injure themselves, and so they end up in the ground of death.

I have always heard that one skilled at tending life, when walking the open land, does not encounter rhinoceros or tiger; when passing through armies, has no need of shield or blade. The rhinoceros finds no place to drive its horn; the tiger has no place to set its claws; weapons have no place to lodge their blades. Why is this so? Because such a person regards the body as nothing, does not cherish the flesh-self, and his true nature encompasses all that lies beyond the vastness of space — there is no ground where death can reach him.

Discourse

The reason people cling so deeply to the mark of self and fall into contention and turmoil is nothing other than this: they have this body, they have this life, and so they must eat, must dress, must have shelter. What is more, they insist on eating fine food, wearing fine clothes, and living in fine houses. They chase after the pleasures of wind, flowers, snow, and moonlight to amuse this body. They study hygiene and health in meticulous detail to make this body last forever. Little do they realize that feeding life in this way will inevitably feed them straight into the ground of death.

How so? Consider: a small child, when hungry, simply eats; when cold, simply puts on clothes. If there is nothing, he does not scheme to get it. If there is something, he uses it without thinking to save any. As for feeding life and guarding health, he understands none of this. By rights he ought to die. Yet on the contrary, he is able to grow. Once he has grown up and learned to scheme for clothing and food, to feed life and guard health, to chase the pleasures of longevity, on the contrary he feeds himself into old age and arrives at the ground of death. This is sufficient proof that feeding life in this way does not work.

Not only does this approach fail — even those who devote themselves to seated meditation and study alchemical scriptures, if they can transcend the confines of the single body, that may be acceptable; but if they only labor on the flesh-self, it still will not work. (This is discussed in detail elsewhere.) For the human body progresses from youth to prime, from prime to old age. Whatever has life must inevitably have death. Regardless of whether one lives many years or few, none can escape this. Therefore the Sage sees through this principle: he does not seek life on the level of the flesh-self but seeks life on the level of the spirit-self. He does not fear the death of the flesh-self; he fears only the death of the spirit-self.

As Laozi said: "If I had no body, what trouble would I have?" Confucius said: "Sacrifice one's life to accomplish humaneness." Mencius said: "Give up life to take hold of righteousness." He also said: "Whether one dies young or lives long, one does not waver" — meaning that one cultivates the self without regard to the span of one's years. These are all marvelous methods for tending life.

Guan Longfeng and Bi Gan died as martyrs for their states. Bo Yi and Shu Qi died treading the path of humaneness. The Buddha endured King Kalinga's dismemberment, limb by limb. Jesus gave up his body to save the world. These are all models of true life-preservation.

Their flesh-selves died, yet their true natures endure forever. The flesh-self has form and substance; it has a ground where death can reach it. Therefore, where there is life, there is inevitably death. The spirit-self has no body and no location; there is no ground where death can reach it. Therefore it is neither born nor destroyed. Why should anyone, for the sake of feeding a flesh-self that lasts a few decades, let the true nature that endures through all the ages die?

Chapter 51



Translation

Dao brings them to life, De tends to their keeping,
things set them in motion, and circumstance completes them.
So among the ten thousand beings, none fail
to revere Dao and hold De precious.

The reverence Dao commands, the worth De carries —
no title is conferred upon them,
yet always, of themselves, it is so.

Therefore Dao brings them to life and tends to their keeping,
rears them and fosters them,
steadies them and tempers them,
nourishes them and shelters them.

It gives life yet lays no claim,
it acts yet does not lean upon its works,
it rears yet does not lord over them.

This is called the far-reaching De.

Word Notes

- 養 — **"to nurture; to rear"**: also carries the sense of generating life.
- 尊 — **"rank; title of nobility"**: a conferral of position or honors.
- 立 — **"to bring to stand; to establish"**: the appearance of standing tall and fully formed.
- 熟 — **"to bring to ripeness; to temper"**: subjecting the myriad beings to frost and cold in order to mature them.

Chapter Explanation

All things in the world are generated by Dao. Yet Dao's generation of things cannot be seen. When Dao stirs, it becomes De. De endows the myriad beings with their natures and generates all the various kinds. It further borrows the qi of yin and yang to give them form. Following the natural

momentum of things, they grow to completion. For this reason, **the myriad beings all revere Dao and prize De. The reverence for Dao, the preciousness of De** — no one has ever conferred rank or title upon them, yet naturally, of themselves, they are revered and prized.

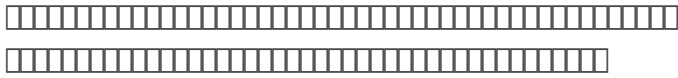
Therefore **Dao gives life to the myriad beings**, and **De nurtures** them. It further **rears** and **fosters** them, **brings them to stand** and **brings them to ripeness**, **sustains** and **shelters** them. And yet Dao **gives life to the myriad beings without claiming it as its own**; it **acts to cultivate the myriad beings without leaning upon its works**; it **rears the myriad beings without lording over them**. This is called **the most profoundly far-reaching De**.

Discourse

The myriad beings are all generated by Dao and nurtured by De. Though human beings are the most sentient among the myriad beings, they remain but one member of that company. The life that human beings receive and are nourished by is nothing other than Dao and De. Since we are generated and nourished by Dao and De, we need only revere Dao and hold De precious — why must we cling to life alone?

People cling to life for no other reason than their wish to be honored in the world. But they do not realize that worldly honor is not truly honorable. What Zhao Meng ennobles, Zhao Meng can debase. How much better to revere Dao and hold De precious, bestowing De upon others, so that people naturally honor you. And though people honor you, you lay no claim to it and do not lean upon your De, so that no one can ennoble you or debase you. Only then can one be honored forever.

Chapter 52



Translation

All under Heaven has a beginning —
take it as the mother of all under Heaven.
Having found the mother,
know thereby the children.
Having known the children,
return and guard the mother:
to the end of your days, no danger.

Stop up the openings, close the gates —
to the end of your life, no exhaustion.
Open the openings, press on with affairs —
to the end of your life, beyond rescue.

To perceive the small: this is called clarity.
To guard the yielding: this is called strength.
Use its radiance,
return again to its clarity —
bring no calamity upon yourself.
This is called practicing the constant.

Word Notes

- 口 — "**openings**": the mouth; by extension, the sense-openings through which spirit and energy leak out.
- 凶 — "**calamity; misfortune**": disaster, ruin.

Chapter Explanation

All things under Heaven have a beginning, a root-source that serves as **the mother of all under Heaven**. If a person can find this root-source — having **found the mother**, he can then **know the children**. Having **known the children**, he must then **return and guard the mother**. By returning to the root and restoring the source, even when the body perishes, there is no danger.

How can one guard the mother? **Stop up the mouth** and **close the gates** so that essence and spirit do not leak out. Then throughout one's entire life, there is no need for toilsome striving — success comes naturally. But if one **opens the mouth** and **presses on to accomplish affairs**, then throughout one's entire life, nothing can save him.

Being able to **perceive the infinitely small beginning** of things is called **clarity**. **Guarding the infinitely yielding mother** is called **strength**. **Use the radiance** that shines outward, then **draw it back and return to the root-clarity**. Do not let it flow out and never return, leaving a lifetime of calamity upon yourself. This is called **practicing the true and constant Dao**.

Discourse

This chapter embodies the principle stated in the *Book of Changes*: "To reckon what has passed is to follow the forward direction; to know what is to come is to go in reverse. Therefore the *Changes* reckons in reverse."

The pre-celestial gives birth to the post-celestial in the forward direction. Following the current downstream, one inevitably reaches exhaustion. Therefore one must reverse course and return to the pre-celestial. But since the pre-celestial has already given birth to the post-celestial, the pre-celestial on its own is spent. It is as though once the mother has given birth to the child, the mother has grown old. One must reunite child and mother in order to restore the original face.

This chapter says: "Having found the mother, know thereby the children" — this is tracing from the pre-celestial root-source to discover the post-celestial. "Having known the children, return and guard the mother" — this is using the post-celestial to return to the pre-celestial. "Stop up the openings, close the gates" — this is the method for returning to the pre-celestial. It is precisely what Confucius taught Yan Hui as the four prohibitions: "Do not look at what violates propriety, do not listen to what violates propriety, do not speak what violates propriety, do not act on what violates propriety." It is what the Buddhist scriptures call "no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind." Only in this way can one pass from conditioned existence back to the unconditioned — truly constant and unchanging.

Chapter 53



Translation

Were I to have the least scrap of knowledge,
I would walk upon the great road —
my only dread: ostentation.

The great road is perfectly level,
yet the people prefer the byways.

The court is harsh and exacting,
the fields lie overgrown and desolate,
the granaries stand utterly empty —
yet they dress in embroidered finery,
bear sharp swords at their sides,
gorge themselves on food and drink,
hoard wealth and goods beyond all need.
This is called the ringleader of thieves.
How far this is from Dao!

Word Notes

- 一 — "**solitary; steadfast**": standing alone, unwavering.
- 一 — "**ostentation; boasting**": showing off, self-display.
- 一 — "**level; even**": flat, smooth, without obstacles.
- 一 — "**byway; shortcut**": a strange and out-of-the-way narrow path.
- 一 — "**harsh; exacting**": severe scrutiny in governance.
- 一 — "**overgrown; desolate**": wild and uncultivated.
- 一 — "**granary**": a storehouse for grain and rice.
- 一 — "**sated; surfeited**": having eaten one's fill and more.
- 一 — "**wealth; assets**": money, material goods.
- 一 — "**reed pipe**": a musical instrument made from bamboo tubes; it leads the five tones — when one plays, all harmonize. Hence "the ringleader of thieves": the one who sets the tune for thievery.

Chapter Explanation

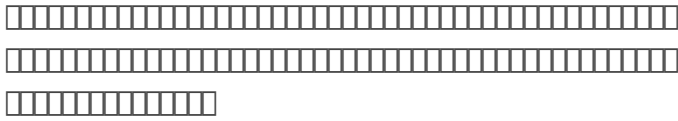
Were I to stand alone with true knowledge, I would be able to walk the great road. My only dread would be **ostentation** — self-aggrandizement. The **great road** is inherently perfectly level. Yet the people prefer to walk strange, out-of-the-way byways.

In the **court**, governance and punishment are harshly exacting. The **fields** are utterly overgrown and desolate. The **granaries** are empty and bare. Yet despite this, people still indulge in luxury: wearing **embroidered finery**, carrying **sharp swords** at their sides, indulging their appetites to **gorge on food and drink**, and greedily hoarding so that **wealth and goods pile up in excess**. This is called **the ringleader of thieves**. How far this is from Dao!

Discourse

The great road is inherently perfectly centered and perfectly upright, level and broad. One may walk it back and forth throughout a lifetime, peacefully and without incident. Unfortunately, people find the great road bland and without flavor — not as interesting as the strange byways, where one can find allurements of sound, beauty, and material goods, free to indulge at will. And so they abandon the proper road and turn down the crooked byways, seeking to dress in embroidered finery, gorge themselves on food and drink, amass wealth and goods, and flaunt their might. Little do they realize that the byways are places where bandits lie in wait. There is great danger ahead.

Chapter 54



Translation

What is skillfully established cannot be uprooted;
what is skillfully held cannot slip away.
Through this, descendants offer the rites without cease.

Cultivate it in oneself — De becomes true.
Cultivate it in the family — De becomes abundant.
Cultivate it in the village — De becomes enduring.
Cultivate it in the state — De becomes full.
Cultivate it in all under Heaven — De becomes universal.

Therefore, observe the person through the person,
observe the family through the family,
observe the village through the village,
observe the state through the state,
observe all under Heaven through all under Heaven.
How do I know all under Heaven is thus?
By this.

Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**to uproot; to pull out**": to wrench from the ground.
- 𠄎 — "**to slip away; to come loose**": to fall away, to be lost.
- 𠄎 — "**to cease; to stop**": to discontinue.
- 𠄎 — "**full; abundant**": overflowing, replete.

Chapter Explanation

What is **skillfully established** is so firmly set that it **cannot be uprooted**. What is **skillfully held** is so securely kept that it can **never slip away**. Passed down to later generations, the **descendants offer the rites without ceasing** — for such a person possesses De.

If one truly **cultivates De in one's own person**, one's De becomes **genuine and true**. If one further **cultivates it in the family**, one's De **overflows to spare**. If one **cultivates it in the**

village, one's De **grows great and enduring**. If one **cultivates it in the state**, one's De becomes **full and replete**. If one **cultivates it in all under Heaven**, one's De becomes **universal and all-pervading**.

Therefore, **take my own person to observe another's person** — if I can cultivate myself, others too can cultivate themselves. **Take my own family to observe another's family** — if I can set my family in order, other families too can be set in order. **Take my own village to observe another's village** — if my village can be transformed, other villages too can be transformed. **Take my own state to observe another's state** — if my state can be well-governed, other states too can be well-governed. **Take my realm under Heaven to observe another's realm** — if my realm can be brought to peace, other realms too can be brought to peace. How do I know that all under Heaven can be brought to peace? By inference from my own person.

Discourse

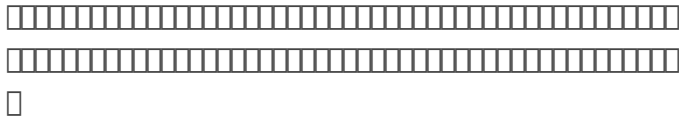
The greatest thing one can establish is meritorious service to the state. The finest thing one can hold is a disc of precious jade. Yet when the rival state is destroyed, the meritorious minister perishes. A common person bears no guilt, but possessing a jade disc is itself a crime. Thus establishing merit and holding jade not only cannot endure — they even bring the danger of death.

Only one who holds Dao in his person and establishes De in the world can achieve what is described as "received in the ancestral temple, preserved by descendants through the generations." Through ten thousand ages, nothing will change this.

Establishing De in the world may appear extremely difficult, extremely grand. But in truth it is extremely near, extremely easy — it lies right in one's own person. Does not the *Doctrine of the Mean* say: "In hewing a handle from a handle, the model is not far off"? Does not the *Great Learning* say: "Everything, without exception, is rooted in cultivating the self"? Does not Mencius say: "Cultivate your own person, and all under Heaven will find peace"?

If one can truly cultivate De in one's own person, one can not only set the family in order, govern the state, and bring peace to all under Heaven — one can govern all worlds, all realms under Heaven, all of Heaven and Earth and the myriad beings. All of these are nurtured and sustained from one's own person.

Chapter 55



Translation

One who holds De in abundance
is like a newborn infant.
Venomous insects do not sting it,
fierce beasts do not seize it,
birds of prey do not strike it.
Its bones are weak, its sinews soft, yet its grip is firm.
It knows nothing of the joining of male and female,
yet its vitality stirs —
essence at its utmost.
It cries all day without growing hoarse —
harmony at its utmost.

Harmony upon harmony — this is called the constant.
To know the constant is called clarity.
To augment life is called auspicious.
For the heart to command the qi is called strength.
When beings reach their prime, they age —
this is called departing from Dao.
What departs from Dao comes to an early end.

Word Notes

- □ — **"to hold; to contain"**: to enfold within oneself.
- □ — **"to sting"**: when an insect pierces the skin and injects venom.
- □ — **"to seize; to pin down"**: to press down and grab.
- □ — **"to snatch; to swoop upon"**: the strike of a bird seizing prey.
- □ — **"to grip; to grasp"**: to hold in the fist.
- □□ — **"the infant's member"**: the external genitals of a small child.
- □ — **"hoarse"**: an angry, strained cry.

Chapter Explanation

One who **holds De in abundance** is compared to a newborn infant. Because the infant does not know how to harm things, its abundant De resonates and summons a response: **venomous insects do not sting** it, **fierce beasts do not seize** it, **birds that snatch their prey do not strike** it. Though its **bones are weak and sinews soft**, its vital force grips and holds with great firmness. It knows nothing of the **union of male and female**, yet **true yang stirs of itself**. This shows that its **true essence has reached the utmost purity**. It **cries all day**, yet its voice never grows hoarse or strained. Its **harmony has reached the utmost**.

One who understands harmony is said to **know the constant Dao**. One who knows the constant Dao is said to have attained **the utmost clarity**. Nourishing oneself through Supreme Harmony, augmenting the vital force, is called **auspicious**. When the heart does not let the temperamental qi disturb it, and can lead the qi so that it does not become violent and unruly, this is called **true strength**.

In this way, preserving Supreme Harmony augments the vital force, and the heart leading the qi so that it does not leak outward constitutes strength — only then does one accord with Dao. Like the myriad beings whose vital qi bursts forth: they may indeed grow strong and vigorous, but **when beings reach their prime, they age**. This is called **departing from Dao**. **What departs from Dao comes to an early end**.

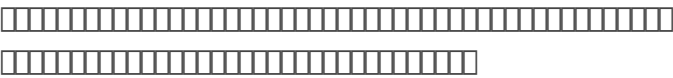
Discourse

The preceding chapter spoke of establishing De throughout all under Heaven. The root-source of this lies in cultivating the self. This cultivation of the self requires no exotic methods or extraordinary arts — one need only not lose the heart of the newborn infant. The infant's heart is harmonious, its qi is soft — this is the image of abundant De. Its harmonious qi resonates and summons: dragons descend, tigers submit.

Moreover, the infant is without selfishness and without desire. Its primal qi does not leak outward. Therefore it can generate life ceaselessly. Whenever beings allow their vital qi to burst forth and spill outward, they may indeed flourish and thrive. But when the fullness reaches its extreme, decline inevitably follows. Decline leads to old age and death.

Only the pine and cypress do not flourish greatly in spring, and therefore they do not wither in the cold of winter. If even plants and trees are so, how much more should this be true of human beings?

Chapter 56



Translation

Those who know do not speak;
those who speak do not know.
Block the openings,
shut the gates,
blunt the sharp,
loose the tangled,
soften the light,
merge with the dust —
this is called mysterious sameness.

Therefore it cannot be sought in closeness,
nor held at distance;
it cannot be turned to advantage,
nor made to suffer harm;
it cannot be lifted to honor,
nor cast into lowness.
Thus it is prized above all under Heaven.

Word Notes

- 远 — "**distant**": far, remote.

Chapter Explanation

Those who truly know Dao do not speak of it. Those who speak of it do not truly know. Those who truly know Dao **block their outward openings** and **shut their gates against what enters from without**. They **blunt their sharp edges, free themselves from entanglement, soften their light**, and **merge with the worldly dust**. This is called **mysterious sameness**. Why is it called mysterious sameness? Because one cannot draw near to such a person, nor keep distant from them; one cannot profit them, nor harm them; one cannot ennoble them, nor demean them. Therefore they are the most honored in all under Heaven.

Discourse

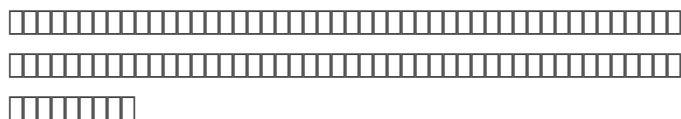
The great Dao is without sound or scent. It cannot be put into words. The moment one speaks of it, one falls into fixed appearances — and this is not truly understanding Dao. Those who truly understand Dao cast off their acuity and let fall their scheming; inwardly they give rise to no discriminating marks; outwardly they merge with others. What need have they for lofty rhetoric and sweeping pronouncements? And what need for endless argument and debate?

In an era of the Great Unity, everyone would be a person of noble character, so merging with others would naturally follow. But even in an era of chaos, when people's conduct is far from uniform, the person of Dao still merges with others. Yet though they merge, they are harmonious but not swept along — they differ from people of the world. People of the world seek closeness with, lift to honor, and turn to advantage those who are the same as themselves, while they hold at distance, cast into lowness, and cause harm to those who differ. The person of Dao is the same as others, yet no one can seek closeness with them, turn them to advantage, or lift them to honor — this is sameness that is not-sameness. And since no one can seek closeness with them, turn them to advantage, or lift them to honor, yet equally no one can hold them at distance, cause them harm, or cast them into lowness — this is not-sameness that is sameness. This is the most mysterious kind of sameness. Though on the surface they are the same as others, their inner spiritual nobility is something no one can actually reach.

The Confucian disciple Yan Hui, though he walked step by step when the Master walked and hastened when the Master hastened, still sighed in admiration: "The more I look up, the higher it seems; the more I bore into it, the harder it becomes; I see it before me, and suddenly it is behind." This is precisely the principle at work.

Yet people of the world fail to perceive this. They say that Mozi's "elevating sameness" — his political doctrine of enforced uniformity — originated with Laozi. They do not realize that Mozi's sameness is caught up in outward traces — it is external, institutionalized, coerced. Laozi's sameness is supremely mysterious. Laozi and Mozi are vastly different indeed.

Chapter 57



Translation

Govern the state with uprightness,
deploy the army with surprise,
win all under Heaven through noninterference.

How do I know this is so?
By these signs:

The more taboos that burden the world,
the poorer the people become.
The more sharp instruments the people possess,
the darker the state grows.
The more cleverness and skill people cultivate,
the stranger the novelties that arise.
The more laws and decrees proliferate,
the more thieves and bandits flourish.

Therefore the Sage declares:
I act without acting, and the people transform on their own.
I love stillness, and the people right themselves.
I do not interfere, and the people prosper.
I am free of desire, and the people return to the uncarved.

Word Notes

- 日 — "ever deeper," "all the more": a sense of deepening further, intensifying.

Chapter Explanation

Govern the state with uprightness. Deploy the army with surprise. Win all under Heaven through noninterference. How do I know that all under Heaven can be won through noninterference? Because when all under Heaven is burdened with many taboos, the people fear violating the prohibitions, lose their livelihoods, and grow ever poorer. When the people are furnished with many sharp instruments of convenience, where there are mechanical affairs there

must be mechanical minds; people treat one another with cunning and stratagem, and the state grows ever darker. When people prize cleverness and skill, strange and useless novelties multiply all the more. When one governs people by laws and decrees, the more conspicuous these become, the more thieves and bandits flourish. All of this is the consequence of meddling. Therefore the Sage says: **I act without acting**, and the people naturally transform themselves. **I love stillness**, and the people naturally right themselves. **I do not interfere**, and the people naturally prosper. **I am free of desire**, and the people naturally return to the uncarved.

Discourse

I, this young student, upon reading this chapter, came to understand that learning is not a pedantic and useless doctrine, and that followers of Dao are not pedantic and useless people. It is simply that governing a state through Dao and transforming the people through De means one is unwilling to deploy one's methods of Dao lightly — for fear of awakening the people's calculating minds, which would only throw the state into ever greater turmoil.

When military force becomes unavoidable — when the fate of the state and the lives of the people hang in the balance — then the person of Dao can indeed achieve victory through surprise and rescue the world from calamity. But the "surprise" they employ is not cunning stratagems or deceitful ruses; it is not brute force or freakish valor. It is simply that which surpasses people's expectations — something different from the way others wage war.

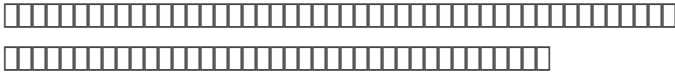
Confucius, for instance, did not consider wrestling a tiger barehanded or wading a river on foot to be the truly remarkable thing; rather, he regarded facing every undertaking with apprehension and succeeding through careful counsel as truly remarkable.

The Marquis of Wu, Zhuge Liang, did not consider capturing Meng Huo to be the remarkable thing — he considered releasing Meng Huo to be remarkable. And it was not one release that was remarkable, but seven releases.

As for the Marquis of Wu playing his lute atop an empty city to turn back Sima Yi's forces, or Zhang Zifang playing his flute on a mountaintop to scatter the Hegemon-King's army — these are but lesser instances of the marvelous.

For the person of Dao does not consider it marvelous to win battles by filling the cities with slaughter and filling the fields with slaughter. What they consider marvelous is retiring the troops with a laugh and a jest, ending war and stilling strife. Military force is used only to rescue the world from chaos. Once chaos is quelled, military force is no longer employed, and one returns to honoring Dao and treasuring De, to clarity, stillness, and nonaction.

Chapter 58



Translation

When governance is broad and unhurried,
the people grow pure and generous.
When governance is sharp and prying,
the people grow mean and wanting.

Misfortune — fortune leans upon it.
Fortune — misfortune lurks within it.
Who knows where this turning will end?
Is there no fixed standard of right?

The upright reverts to the strange,
the good reverts to the monstrous.
Humanity's bewilderment before this
has gone on for a very long time indeed.

Therefore the Sage is
square but does not cut,
edged but does not wound,
straight but does not impose,
bright but does not dazzle.

Word Notes

- 厚 — "**pure and generous**": thick, rich; honest and generous in nature.
- 倚 — "**leans upon**": rests against, depends on; because of, by reason of.
- 伏 — "**lurks within**": hidden, concealed; lies hidden within.
- 怪 — "**monstrous**": a harmful prodigy; a monstrous aberration.
- 伤 — "**wound**": to cut, to injure.
- 横 — "**impose**": unrestrained, presumptuous; impudent, unbridled.
- 炫 — "**dazzle**": to flaunt, to show off; to boast, to make a display.

Chapter Explanation

When the state's governance is **broad and unhurried**, the people are naturally pure and generous. When the state's governance is **sharp and prying**, the people naturally become mean and wanting. When things reach their extreme, they reverse: **misfortune is what fortune leans upon; fortune is where misfortune lies hidden**. Fortune and misfortune cycle endlessly — who can know where this turning ends? It is not that there is no fixed standard of right. But what appears upright turns again to the strange, and what appears good turns again to the monstrous. The people's bewilderment over where right and wrong, good and evil truly lie has indeed lasted a very long time. Therefore the Sage, though **square**, does not cut sharply with those corners. Though **edged**, the Sage does not wound with that severity. Though **following the straight way**, the Sage does not push it to the point of presumptuousness. Though **possessed of radiance**, the Sage does not make a dazzling display.

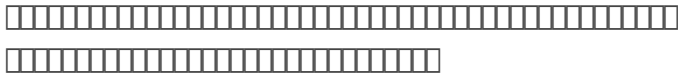
Discourse

The value of governance lies in grasping the guiding thread and holding fast to the essentials — not in sharp and prying scrutiny, not in burdensome and exacting decrees. When governance becomes exacting and burdensome, not only will water too clear fail to sustain fish, but moreover, whatever those above favor, those below will pursue to excess — breeding customs of harshness, calculation, and deceit.

Consider the principle of all things in this world: they cycle in alternation. When one pushes discernment to its extreme, it reverses into confusion. Take the analogy of a person with good eyesight, which we call "keen sight." If they strain to gaze at something extremely distant, exhausting their power of vision, they end up seeing flowers in empty space. They would have been better off as someone with less keen sight, who simply sees blue sky and bright sun.

Therefore in all matters, it is better to hold something in reserve and not exhaust things completely. Yet holding in reserve merely slows the exhaustion — in the end, exhaustion still comes. One must transcend the alternating cycles of light and darkness, fortune and misfortune, right and wrong, good and evil — step entirely outside the loop — before one can find a true resting place. Otherwise, day after day one is lost in the turning wheel, coming and going: what one took for upright reverts to the strange, what one took for good reverts to the monstrous. Where then will one find direction?

Chapter 59



Translation

For governing people and serving Heaven,
nothing surpasses drawing inward.
Only through drawing inward
can one submit early.
Submitting early — this is called
accumulating De, layer upon layer.

With De accumulated, layer upon layer,
nothing lies beyond one's power.
When nothing lies beyond one's power,
no one can know one's limit.
When no one can know one's limit,
one may hold the state.

Holding the mother of the state,
one may long endure.
This is called deepening the roots, firming the base —
the Dao of long life and enduring vision.

Word Notes

- 引 — "**frugality**": drawing inward, withdrawing, emptying, stilling. Not mere parsimony — the entire Daoist posture of self-restraint.
- 根 — "**base**": the root; the foundation.

Chapter Explanation

Governing people and **serving Heaven** — nothing surpasses drawing inward, withdrawing, emptying, and stilling. Only one who draws inward and stills the self can be said to have **submitted early** to the way of serving Heaven and governing people. One who has long practiced this way is said to have **accumulated De, layer upon layer**. With De accumulated, layer upon layer, **nothing lies beyond one's power**. When nothing lies beyond one's power, **no one can know one's limit**. When no one can know one's limit, **one may hold the state**. Having secured **the mother of the state, one may long endure**. This frugality of drawing inward, if applied to

self-cultivation, is called **deepening the roots and firming the base** — the Dao of long life and enduring vision.

Discourse

This chapter treats governing people and serving Heaven as equally important. This is precisely the spirit of the Two Emperors and Three Kings — Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, and Kings Wen and Wu — the sages who were scrupulous in the affairs of the people and reverent before the mandate of Heaven.

If we examine the ancient scriptures and classics, the matters of governing people and serving Heaven are all set forth in the fullest detail. From this it is clear that serving Heaven is no vague and ethereal affair. Yet the sages' way of serving Heaven was nothing like the manner of the rulers of the Qin, Han, Tang, and Song dynasties, with their feng-shan sacrifices and apotropaic rites, their fawning irreverence and superstitious practices. It was, rather, a matter of having few private desires and little selfishness, of utmost sincerity penetrating and moving Heaven, resonating with the heart of Heaven itself. Then naturally yin and yang would be in harmony, the seasons would follow their proper course, and there would be no calamities of flood, drought, or pestilence, no people given to debauchery, wickedness, extravagance, or excess.

For human beings dwell within qi as fish dwell within water. When the water grows turbid, the fish are unsettled. When qi departs from its proper state, it gives rise to disorder among people. The Sage serves Heaven through sincerity, starting from the very transformation of qi — this is the marvelous method of rectifying the root and purifying the source.

Moreover, since all beings are born of Heaven, being scrupulous in human affairs is itself reverence toward Heaven. Governing people and serving Heaven are originally one and the same undertaking. One who can govern people can serve Heaven; one who can serve Heaven can naturally govern people. Among the rulers of ancient times who truly governed all under Heaven, which of them was not one who could stand unashamed even in the hidden corner of the room?

As for the way of governing people and serving Heaven: the Confucian disciple Zhonggong exemplified it when he dwelt in reverence and acted with simplicity. In this he grasped the essentials. He could face south, governing through nonaction, and attain lasting stability. If one applies this way to cultivating the self and establishing one's destiny, one can likewise attain long life and enduring vision. For governing the state and cultivating the self are, after all, one and the same principle.

Chapter 60



Translation

Governing a great state is like cooking a small fish.
When one presides over all under Heaven through Dao,
the ghosts do not work their wonders.
It is not that the ghosts cannot work wonders —
their wonders do not harm the people.
It is not only that their wonders do not harm the people —
the Sage, too, does not harm the people.
When neither harms the other,
De converges and returns to them both.

Word Notes

- 烹 — **"to cook"**: Read as 烹 (pēng). Means to cook, to prepare by boiling.
- 小 — **"fresh food"**: Fresh, delicate food — here, a small fish.
- 自 — **"to preside over"**: To be personally present at, to attend to in person.

Chapter Explanation

Governing a great state is like cooking a small fish — if you do not handle it properly, it falls apart into a mess. **When one presides over all under Heaven through Dao**, the ghosts do not work their wonders. It is not that the ghosts have lost their numinous power — it is that their numinous power does not harm people. The Sage governs all under Heaven without harming people, and so the ghosts likewise refrain from harming. When **neither of these two harms the other**, this is entirely the response evoked by the Sage's abundant De. Therefore the De that refrains from harming converges from both sides and returns to them both.

Discourse

Once a friend invited me to dinner and prepared two dishes — one grand course and one dish of small fish. The grand course was superbly done, but the small fish was a disaster: some pieces were raw, some burned to a crisp — a complete mess, utterly flavorless. The host flew into a rage and called the cook in to berate him. The cook said: "These small fish are terribly difficult to prepare. Some are bigger, some smaller; some need salt, some should be bland; some require a

gentle flame, some a roaring fire. When you lump them all together and cook them at once, of course it turns out badly. If you want them done right, you need a great cauldron, ample water, and a perfectly blue flame — the method of nonaction. Follow the principle that the great soup is left unseasoned: use no special ingredients, and what comes forth will have a natural flavor. But people in this world prefer rich, heavy tastes, so I did not dare cook it that way." I laughed heartily and said: "Not only can you not cook properly — you even talk big and mock the world!" But now, as I, this young student, annotate this chapter and encounter the words "governing a great state is like cooking a small fish," I realize that what he said was the language of Dao. His understanding is no less than that of Cook Ding, who served Lord Wenhui.

And I came to a further realization: Laozi himself was a great master of the culinary arts. What a pity that he was hidden away as Keeper of the Archives! Had he been put in charge of cooking, he would surely have produced the most marvelous and nourishing flavors to feast all under Heaven — surpassing even the legendary "salt and plum" counsel of the minister Fu Yue. As for Chen Ruzi, who cut meat with such meticulous evenness — he would not even be worth mentioning.

I imagine that Laozi, in cooking his small fish, would certainly have used the method of "the great tailor does not cut." Since his cooking does not hack and carve, his governance would surely not harm the people. Since it does not harm the people, the spirit of harmony would be summoned forth, and there would be no natural disasters or human calamities. The state could enjoy lasting peace and enduring stability.

What is the reason for this? Let me try to explain the underlying principle. In all the cosmos, what brings people and the myriad beings into existence is the qi of yin and yang. The power that governs yin qi is called "ghost." The power that governs yang qi is called "spirit." To speak of them as one, we call this "Heaven." (The "heavens" spoken of in the Buddhist scriptures are stages within a system of learning — they are not the Heaven that governs yin and yang.) To speak of this as the sovereign over yin and yang is to call it Shangdi — the Lord on High — or the True Lord, the True Ruler. (The "Shakra" of the Buddhist scriptures is comparable to saying "the ruler of such-and-such a country" — he is not the one and only Lord on High.) (In my earlier annotations to the *Daqian Tushuo*, what I called "the Lord on High" referred only to the spirit-lord governing the yang-qi portion. The "Lord on High" I speak of here is precisely what the *Book of Changes* calls the Supreme Ultimate.)

The Lord on High is the sovereign of all Heaven, Earth, people, and things — just as the human heart is the sovereign of the entire body. Even if it is merely the skin that is injured, the heart inevitably feels pain. Therefore, if the people are harmed without cause, the Lord on High inevitably feels pain. Toward the dead and wounded, a feeling of grief and compassion arises. The moment grief and compassion arise, yang qi weakens. Toward those who have done the harming, a feeling of pain and loathing arises. The moment pain and loathing arise, yin qi grows strong. Once yin qi grows strong, demons hold authority and scatter all manner of freakish disasters and sudden calamities far and wide. Moreover, the people and creatures born in such a time are largely imbued with this baleful, harsh, and killing qi. Those with wasp eyes and a leopard's voice, born cruel by nature — this is precisely because they have absorbed the most of this qi. People born imbued with such qi will inevitably carry out great slaughter, and all under Heaven falls into chaos.

When this chapter says "the ghosts do not work their wonders" and all the rest — this is the principle behind it.

Someone said to me: "Whether your words are correct need not be debated. Since you say the Lord on High and the myriad beings are like one body, then the one who harms is the Lord on High, and the one who is harmed is also the Lord on High. The Lord on High has harmed himself. Would the Lord on High then punish himself? It is as if one's own hand injures one's own foot — would the heart then command the foot to punish the hand?"

I said: "You know one thing but not the other. You understand the form but not the spirit. When I say the Lord on High punishes people, I do not mean it in the way that superstitious folk and shamans describe it. It is the natural principle within the transformation of qi. The Lord on High does not deliberately punish anyone — all beings bring consequences upon themselves. When people slaughter and harm one another, yin and yang fall out of harmony, and all manner of disasters brew forth. The appearance of punishment manifests naturally."

"Furthermore, you say that one cannot punish oneself. But in truth, self-punishment permits not even the slightest leniency — you simply do not realize it. I once tested this through personal experience. One day I was using my right hand to cut paper with a knife. I pressed too hard and slashed my left hand. My heart ached terribly, and I felt compassion for the left hand and resentment toward the right. I glared at the right hand for a long time. The next day, the left hand had stopped hurting, but the right hand had swollen up. My insides felt unwell too. I called a doctor to take my pulse. The doctor said: 'The heart pulse is weak, and the liver qi is overactive. This is because you have experienced both grief and anger, causing yin and yang to fall out of harmony and the internal organs to attack one another. Once the heart is calm and at peace, you will naturally recover. Medicine cannot cure this.'"

"Hearing this, I was suddenly and completely enlightened. I realized that the discomfort in my organs was caused by the heart's agitation. The swelling and pain in my right hand came from the heart's resentment — in the moment of glaring with anger, a surge of malignant qi was sent crashing into it, and so it swelled. When I reflect on it now, I followed the doctor's advice and kept my heart calm and my qi at peace for a long while before I gradually recovered."

"I thought further: the left hand is my hand, and the right hand is also my hand. The left hand was already injured — would I truly wish for the right hand to suffer as well? Though I had no intention of making it suffer, in the moment of resentment the heart stirred and the qi issued forth without my awareness. The right hand hurt unbearably, and I could not call the qi back even if I wanted to. I realized then that when a person punishes himself — even those who fall ill from the seven emotions — they are punishing themselves without knowing it."

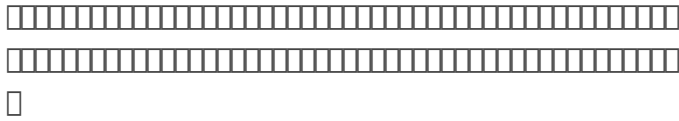
"And from this I further realized that the Lord on High's punishment of people works in precisely this way."

I then thought of King Wen, whose compassion extended even to dry bones, and King Tang, who removed three sides of the hunting net. These were not the benevolence of a soft-hearted woman — they were acts that harmonized yin and yang. Therefore the Sage's governance of all under

Heaven attends entirely to the root, not the surface. For all under Heaven to enjoy lasting peace in the future, there is no alternative but to be benevolent toward the people and cherish all things, and to nurture and warm the qi of Supreme Harmony.

Moreover, consider this: when I alone kept my heart calm and my qi at peace, my illness was cured. If all the people under Heaven kept their hearts calm and their qi at peace, would not all the illnesses of all under Heaven be cured as well?

Chapter 61



Translation

A great state is the downstream flow,
the confluence of all under Heaven,
the female of all under Heaven.
The female overcomes the male through stillness;
by stillness she makes herself low.
Thus when a great state humbles itself before small states,
it draws them in.
When a small state humbles itself before a great state,
it is drawn in.
So one humbles itself and thereby receives;
the other humbles itself and is received.
A great state wants no more than to gather and tend others;
a small state wants no more than to be taken under.
Both attain what they seek —
and so it is the greater that should take the lower place.

Word Notes

-  — **"together"**: To unite, to combine. Here: to shelter and nurture jointly.

Chapter Explanation

A great state is like the downstream flow of water — the place where all the hundred streams converge. It is the confluence of all under Heaven, like the **female of all under Heaven**. The female constantly overcomes the male's movement through stillness; through stillness she practices the way of placing herself below others. Therefore, when **a great state can humbly lower itself** and dwell beneath the small states, it wins the hearts of the small states. When **a small state humbly lowers itself** and dwells beneath the great state, it wins the heart of the great state. So one **lowers itself and thereby wins** others' willing submission, while the other **lowers itself and is received** with gracious treatment. A great state desires nothing more than to gather and tend others; a small state desires nothing more than to serve others. In this way, great state and small state each obtain what they desire. Therefore **the great state should take**

the initiative in lowering itself. If even the great state takes the lower position, the small state need not even be mentioned.

Discourse

This chapter discusses the foreign policy by which states should coexist — using De to win others' allegiance rather than military force, overcoming through yielding rather than through strength. The great state, as the one toward which small states naturally gravitate, should take the lead in humbling itself and treating the small states with generous accommodation, so as to preserve the peace of the world.

For great states habitually rely on power to bully others and on military force to swallow them up. They do not realize that when they act this way, the small states — far from daring to submit — will inevitably fear the extinction of their nations and their peoples. They will band together, many small states uniting, and fight the great state to the death. The great state, having something to rely upon, will inevitably grow arrogant. Once arrogant, its qi becomes bloated and dissipated. Once bloated and dissipated, it will inevitably be defeated in the end.

The small states, driven by fear, will inevitably return to the root when pushed to extremity. They will be able to endure humiliation and place themselves below others. Moreover, the many small states will share sympathy for their common plight, and feelings of mutual care will arise. They will be of one heart and one De. Their qi will be tragic and heroic. With tragic and heroic qi, they will inevitably triumph in the end.

But after their triumph, they will walk the same old path as the great state before them. Their cruelty toward the defeated will be even more severe. The defeated, now suffering under this cruelty, will inevitably rouse themselves to greatness and seek revenge. And so wars follow upon wars, with never a single day of peace.

Therefore one must take non-contention as one's contention and yielding as one's strength, humbly placing oneself below, in order to extinguish the calamity of war. Consider how the downstream flow of water dwells in the lowest place, contending with nothing — yet all the waters converge upon it. Is this not proof that through humility one becomes the destination toward which all gravitate?

The wars and slaughter of today's world have reached their utmost extreme. Why not try this marvelous remedy? If a state that possesses De and vision were to act with keen eyes and quick hands and try this method first — a great state would need three years, a middling state seven years, a small state ten years — there would certainly be great results. If it proved utterly ineffective, then not only may they burn the printing blocks and set fire to the books of this *Dao De Jing* — I myself would willingly accept the blame for deceiving the people and misleading the state.

Chapter 62



Translation

Dao is the sanctuary of the myriad beings —
treasure of the good,
refuge of those who are not good.
Beautiful words may buy favor in the marketplace;
honored conduct may raise a person above others.
But when a person falls short of goodness,
why would one cast them away?

Therefore, when the Son of Heaven is enthroned
and the Three Dukes installed —
though one brings forward jade discs held in both hands,
borne ahead of a team of four horses —
none of this compares to sitting still and advancing in Dao.

Why did the ancients hold Dao so dear?
Was it not said: seek, and you obtain;
transgress, and you are pardoned?
This is why Dao is the most precious thing under Heaven.

Word Notes

- 室 — "**sanctuary**": The southwest corner of a room — the place where a person rests and finds shelter.
- 立 — "**to establish**": To set up, to install in office.
- 合 — "**held in both hands**": The hands joined together. A jade disc so large it must be held with both hands.
- 一 — "**a team of four horses**": Four horses pulling a single chariot.

Chapter Explanation

Dao is the place where the myriad beings find their home and rest — the **treasure** that good people use to cultivate themselves and bring order to the world, and the thing that even those who are **not good** rely upon to protect themselves. How can those who are not good borrow its protection? There is a saying that puts it well: when one's speech accords with Dao, one can win

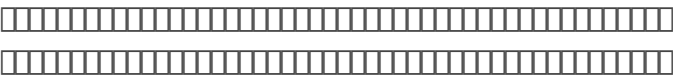
others over; when one's conduct accords with Dao, one can rise above others. When a person is not good, if they can **reform and start anew**, why should anyone cast them aside? Therefore, when one uses Dao to enthrone the **Son of Heaven** and establish the **Three Dukes**, only those who possess Dao can fill these positions, and only then will people submit. For this reason, even if one presents a great **jade disc held in both hands**, borne ahead of a **team of four horses** — these do not compare to sitting still and advancing in Dao. **Why did the ancients prize Dao** so? Is it not because whatever one seeks through it can be obtained, and whatever transgressions one has committed can be pardoned? This is why it is **the most precious thing under Heaven**.

Discourse

A jade disc held in both hands and a team of four horses are what the world considers precious treasures. Yet when you are hungry, you cannot eat them; when you are cold, you cannot wear them; and when the state faces a crisis, they cannot save it. How, then, can they be considered precious? Moreover, the House of Zhao possessed a jade disc worth multiple cities, and it brought them nothing but aggression from Qin. Duke Jing of Qi had horses by the thousands, yet when he died, the people could not find a single good thing to say about him. Such jade discs and teams of horses are not merely useless — they are positively harmful.

Therefore the good person does not treasure such things, but treasures Dao. For with Dao, every inch of progress brings an inch of benefit; every foot of progress brings a foot of benefit. Whatever one seeks is obtained. Transgressions can be pardoned. It can bring order to the state and peace to all under Heaven, causing the myriad beings each to find their proper place.

Chapter 63



Translation

Act through nonaction.
Attend to affairs through non-interference.
Taste the tasteless.
Regard the great as small, the many as few.
Repay enmity with De.

Plan for the difficult while it is still easy;
act on the great while it is still small.
The difficult affairs of all under Heaven
must arise from what is easy.
The great affairs of all under Heaven
must arise from what is small.

Therefore the Sage never treats things as great,
and so is able to achieve greatness.
One who promises lightly will rarely keep faith;
one who takes much as easy will meet much that is hard.
Therefore the Sage still regards things as difficult,
and so in the end encounters no difficulty.

Word Notes

- 謀 — **"to plan"**: To plan for, to deliberate upon.
- 許 — **"promise"**: To agree, to assent, to give one's word.

Chapter Explanation

Act with nonaction as one's action. **Attend** to affairs with non-interference as one's approach. **Taste** the tasteless as one's flavor. The **great**, regard as small; the **many**, regard as few. **Repay enmity with De**. **Plan for difficult things** while they are still easy. **Act on great things** while they are still minute. The **difficult affairs** of all under Heaven must begin from what is easy; the **great affairs** of all under Heaven must begin from what is minute. For this reason, the Sage **never waits until things have grown great** before attending to them, and so is able to accomplish great things. Those who **make promises lightly** will inevitably fail to follow through

and prove untrustworthy. Those who **consider too many things easy** will inevitably find much that is difficult. For this reason, the Sage still **treats things as difficult** — and so in the end encounters no difficulty. To treat things as difficult is precisely what ensures they will not become so.

Discourse

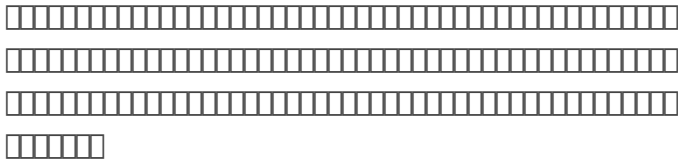
The general meaning of the entire chapter concerns acting on difficult things while they are still easy and on great things while they are still small — forestalling disaster before it takes shape, remaining watchful and alert. The entire life's learning of the Marquis of Wu, Zhuge Liang, was drawn from this chapter.

Only the words about "repaying enmity with De" seem at odds with Confucius's teaching, which left me greatly puzzled. After careful reflection, I finally understood. Confucius was speaking for the human realm, and his standard had to be one that every person could practice. That is why he said: "Repay enmity with uprightness." Even repaying enmity with uprightness is something most people find difficult to achieve. If one were to say "repay enmity with De" — would that not be merely pleasant to the ear and impossible to put into practice?

Moreover, the person who asked Confucius about "repaying enmity with De" must have observed that people in the world repay grudge with grudge in an endless, escalating cycle, never reaching a resolution. And so he overcorrected and proposed this idea. But he did not realize that as long as one is conscious of De and enmity and repayment, one still harbors the discriminating mind of self and other. With such a discriminating mind, not only is it impossible to carry out — it also runs contrary to human nature. That is why Confucius did not permit it.

As for what Laozi says about repaying enmity with De — this belongs to the realm of divine transformation, where one has merged into a single body with the myriad beings. Such a person does not know what De is, what enmity is, or what repayment is. Others observe that this person has forgotten both kindness and enmity, and from the outside they describe it as "repaying enmity with De." But in truth, there is no so-called De, no so-called enmity, and no so-called repayment at all.

Chapter 64



Translation

What is settled is easy to hold.
What shows no sign yet is easy to plan for.
What is brittle is easy to break.
What is minute is easy to disperse.
Act before things come into being;
govern before disorder arises.

A tree you can wrap your arms around
was born from a hair's tip.
A nine-storied terrace
rose from a heap of earth.
A journey of a thousand li
begins beneath your feet.

Those who contrive defeat things;
those who cling lose them.
Therefore the Sage acts without contrivance and so meets no defeat,
clings to nothing and so suffers no loss.

When people take up their affairs,
they often ruin them just as they near completion.
Be as careful at the end as at the beginning,
and no affair will come to ruin.

Therefore the Sage desires what others do not desire
and does not prize what is hard to obtain.
The Sage learns what others do not learn
and restores what the multitude has left behind.
Thus the Sage assists the natural unfolding of the myriad things
and does not dare to act.

Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**brittle**": When a thing is young and tender, it snaps easily.
- 𠄎 — "**to snap**": To break apart, to split.
- 𠄎 — "**a hair**": The finest hair — here, the smallest possible beginning.

Chapter Explanation

When all under Heaven is **settled**, it is easy to maintain. When affairs have **not yet shown their first signs**, they are easy to plan for. When things are **brittle**, they are easy to break. When things are **minute**, they are easy to disperse. One must **act on things before they have come into being** and **govern before disorder arises**. A tree you can wrap your arms around **grew from a hair's tip**. A nine-story terrace **rose from the first pile of earth**. A journey of a thousand li **begins right under your feet**. But all these things follow their natural course. If one **acts upon them with contrivance**, they are defeated. If one **clings to them rigidly**, they are lost. Therefore the Sage **acts without contrivance** and so meets no defeat; **clings to nothing** and so suffers no loss. The affairs that **common people** undertake often **come near to completion only to be ruined**. If one is as **careful at the end as at the beginning**, there will be no ruined affairs. Therefore the Sage **desires what others do not desire** — not prizing goods the world hungers after. The Sage **learns what others do not learn** — and restores what the multitude has left behind. In this way, the Sage **assists the natural unfolding of the myriad things** yet does not dare to act with contrivance.

Discourse

This chapter continues to elaborate the meaning of the preceding chapter, and its message is extremely clear. As for the words "desire what is not desired" and "learn what is not learned" — together with the first three phrases of the preceding chapter, they share the same meaning. They all teach that in undertaking affairs, one should pursue the endeavors that others do not pursue. If you wait until everyone else is already doing it before you act, your labor will bear no fruit. And if others are already doing it, there is no need for you to do it as well. In seeking learning, one should pursue the studies that others do not study. If you wait until everyone else is already studying it before you begin, your learning will be of no great use.

Does not the ancient poem say:

“ The poet's pure scene lies in early spring,
when green willows have barely turned half yellow.
If you wait for the imperial gardens to blaze like brocade,
everyone who steps outside will be watching the flowers.

But Laozi's point here is not to teach people to chase after cleverness or profit. His meaning is to teach people either to embrace the broken and guard the incomplete — preserving and continuing the lineage of Dao — or to blaze new trails and open fresh paths, awakening the people's

understanding.

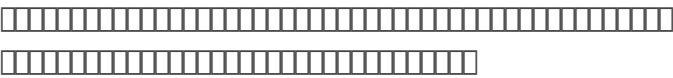
I have deep feelings about these words "learn what is not learned." For I have long borne an undeserved reputation, and through the mistaken kindness of various distinguished gentlemen, many have wished to send me to school to study. But fate was unkind and fortune thin. My grandfather, because my mother, the late Madam Wang — taboo name Chongmeng, courtesy name Jingfan — had spent seven years at the Shandong Public No. 1 Normal School and died of illness just as she was about to graduate, was so grief-stricken that he absolutely refused to let me attend school. And so I was prevented from studying Dao together with my fellow students. Now I am already thirteen years old, still without accomplishment. The learning that others study, I have not been able to study; the learning that others do not study, I do not understand either. Have I not failed the earnest hopes of all the world?

And yet — my fate being what it is — since I dare not compete with others for the common forms of learning, I have quietly resolved to study a little of what others do not study. If there are others in the world who share my plight and feel the same sympathy, they too might join in this inquiry. Let me announce in advance the subjects I wish to study. Because I lack ability, I dare not set as many subjects as a proper school. I have set only two.

One subject is the very newest learning — what will begin to show its first sprouts in five years, become slightly useful in thirty years, and reach full flourishing only after more than nine hundred years. The other subject is the very oldest learning — taking the Qing dynasty as its starting point and tracing back to before the time of Pangu. When the new learning has run its course, the old learning will take its place. New and old revolve in mutual succession. The two subjects merge into one, and there is no longer any distinction between new and old. This is something one must study before one can know, study before one can do. Yet if one turns inward and seeks the innate knowledge and innate ability that are already one's own, is there not also that which can be known and done without study?

Is not my aspiration absurdly impractical? But it is not that I am happy to be this way. It is the times, it is fortune, it is fate. Heaven took my mother from me — and so it is. Heaven has specially appointed me to learn what others do not learn.

Chapter 65



Translation

Those in ancient times who were skilled in practicing the Dao
did not use it to sharpen the people's minds,
but to return them to simplicity.
The people are difficult to govern
because their cleverness runs too deep.
To govern a state through cleverness
is to become the state's undoing.
To govern a state without cleverness
is the state's blessing.
To know these two
is to know the standard.
Always to know the standard —
this is called mysterious De.
Mysterious De is deep and far-reaching,
running counter to the current of worldly things,
until at last it arrives at the Great Accord.

Word Notes

- 一 — "**standard**": Model, exemplar, pattern.

Chapter Explanation

Those in ancient times who were **skilled in governing through Dao** did not first open the people's intellect — they sought to **lead the people back to simplicity**. The reason the people are **difficult to govern** is that their cunning and scheming have grown too great. Therefore, **governing a state through cunning and deceit** is to be a **thief** to that state. **Not governing through cunning and deceit** is the state's **blessing**. To understand the advantages and disadvantages of **these two approaches** is to possess a standard for governance. To be able to know **this standard** is what we call **mysterious De**. Mysterious De is **deep and far-reaching** — it runs **counter to worldly conventions and common sentiments**. Only through this can one arrive at the state of **harmony above and below, the Great Accord**.

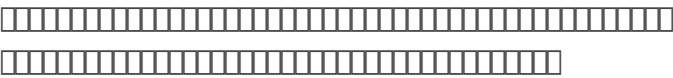
Discourse

Confucius said: "The people can be made to follow it, but they cannot be made to understand it." How could the Sage not wish to open the people's understanding? Yet if one does not first give the people a heart grounded in De and morality, and instead gives them the cunning knowledge of deception and trickery, the people will become impossible to govern and the state will surely fall into chaos.

Therefore one must first lead the people to return to the genuine and go back to the unhewn wood, establishing a foundation of De and morality. Only afterward should one gradually enable them to gain knowledge. Take De and Dao as the root; take knowledge as the branches. Let De and morality advance hand in hand with knowledge. Only then can there be harmony above and below, arriving at the Great Accord.

This is the proper sequence by which the Sage governs all under Heaven through De and morality. How could it be a policy of keeping the people ignorant in order to protect one's own position and serve only autocratic rule?

Chapter 66



Translation

The rivers and the sea reign over a hundred valleys
by their gift of lying low.
Therefore they reign over a hundred valleys.

So when the Sage would rise above the people,
he speaks in words that place him beneath them.
When he would lead the people,
he sets his own person behind them.

Therefore he dwells above, and the people feel no burden;
he stands in front, and no one is harmed.
Therefore all under Heaven gladly lifts him up and never tires of it.

Because he does not contend,
no one under Heaven can contend with him.

Word Notes

- 厭 — "**to grow weary of**": To resent, to find tiresome, to lose patience with.

Chapter Explanation

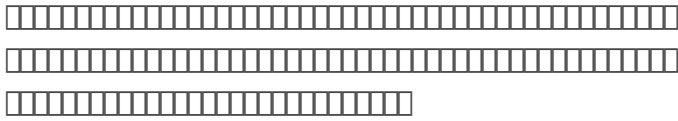
The reason the **rivers and the sea** can be the king to whom the hundred valleys pay homage is that they are **good at occupying the lowest position** — and so all the valley streams converge upon them. For this reason, when the **Sage wishes to rise above others**, he first uses **humble and deferential words**, placing himself below them. When he wishes to **go before others**, he first **places his own person behind** them. Therefore, when he **dwells above others**, the people do not feel burdened by his weight. When he **stands before others**, the people do not envy or resent him. For this reason, all under Heaven **gladly lifts him up** and never grows weary. Because **he does not contend**, no one under Heaven is able to contend with him.

Discourse

The way of humility and non-contention has already been discussed repeatedly in earlier chapters. That this chapter once again explains it at length is because most people in this world compete to be strong and strive to prevail, and none are willing to lower themselves before others. That is why the point is set forth again and again in careful detail, further explaining that only by not contending for the top can one dwell at the top, and only by not contending for the lead can one take the lead.

But this too is simply a natural principle. It is not that one harbors the deliberate intention of dwelling above others while making a show of yielding — resorting to scheming techniques and political artifice.

Chapter 67



Translation

All under Heaven say my Dao is great, yet seems to resemble nothing.
It is precisely because it is great
that it resembles nothing.
Were it to resemble something,
it would long since have become small.

I hold three treasures
and keep them close.
The first is compassion.
The second is frugality.
The third is not daring to be first under Heaven.

From compassion comes courage.
From frugality comes abundance.
From not daring to be first under Heaven
comes the capacity to lead all things.

Now: forsake compassion and grasp at courage,
forsake frugality and grasp at breadth,
forsake the rear and press to the front —
this is death.

In compassion, go to battle and you conquer;
stand in defense and you hold firm.
When Heaven moves to save,
it shelters with compassion.

Word Notes

- 似 — "**to resemble**": To be similar to, to look like something particular.
- 俭 — "**frugality**": Thrift, economizing, saving.

Chapter Explanation

All under Heaven say my Dao is exceedingly great, yet it seems utterly incapable — it resembles nothing at all. It is precisely because Dao is exceedingly great that it seems to resemble nothing. If it resembled some particular thing, it would long since have become something exceedingly small and petty. I have three treasures. I cherish and hold fast to them. The first is called **compassion**. The second is called **frugality**. The third is called **not daring to be first under Heaven**. With a compassionate heart, one's love for others is genuine and unwavering, and so one can be courageous. With frugality, one's wealth and resources will certainly be abundant, and so one can accomplish **expansive undertakings**. **Not daring to be first** under Heaven is to be a **great vessel late to completion** — and so one can become **the chief among all things**. Nowadays, people abandon compassion yet still pursue fierce and aggressive courage; abandon frugality yet still pursue expansive grandeur; abandon the principle of staying behind yet still compete to be first. In this way, they are certain to end in death. This compassion possesses sincere and unwavering perseverance. Use it to go to battle and you will conquer; use it to defend and you will hold firm. When Heaven would save a person, it guards them with compassion.

Discourse

Alas! The present-day world may be reckoned civilized, yet the more civilized it becomes, the higher the standard of living rises — and the more extravagant people become. The more they aim high and pursue the grandiose, the more they delight in novelty and crave the strange. They compete to show off. They compete for outward appearances. The more they compete, the more strained material resources become; the more strained resources become, the more people compete. From contention comes war. From war comes killing. It has reached the point where killing is regarded as a mark of capability. The compassionate heart has been entirely lost. The way of humanity has nearly been extinguished. If one traces this disease to its source, it is nothing other than going in the opposite direction from the three treasures Laozi taught — compassion, frugality, and not daring to be first under Heaven.

Laozi's words are not pedantic and useless. If one has a compassionate heart — like the genuine love of parents for their child — one will certainly have courage, and with courage one can accomplish great things. With frugality, one can ensure a surplus of material resources, enabling one to greatly expand production and to put resources to use and enrich life. Not daring to be first under Heaven is not dependence or lack of vigor. It is to conserve one's vital spirit and preserve it for the right moment, in order to become a great vessel and shoulder the cosmos. Nowadays, without any foundation, people pursue only the branch-tips. How could they not rush toward death?

I, this young student, upon perceiving this — earlier, when the European War was at its most intense — wished to find a way to bring rescue. I thought: all beings are born of Shangdi. In compassion and love for the people and all things, none can surpass Shangdi. Moreover, this very chapter says: "When Heaven moves to save, it shelters with compassion." But Shangdi is in Heaven above; no human has seen Him. I thought: those who represent Shangdi and share His same compassion can only be the **Five Great Religious Founders**.

Take Confucius: "The old are at ease and the young are cherished"; "benevolent toward people, cherishing all things." Laozi esteems Dao and De, holding compassion as a treasure. Shakyamuni

Buddha enters the hells to save all beings. Jesus gives up his body to redeem the sins of all beings. The Patriarch of Islam says the Lord practices compassion and forgiveness. All are of great compassion and great mercy.

And so, taking the central purpose of the Five Great Religious Founders as my basis, I selected passages from each religion's scriptures, combined them, and elaborated upon them, composing *A Compilation to Cease War* as a vanguard for rescuing the world from war and slaughter and for illuminating Dao and De. Furthermore, I wished to provide detailed explanations of the important scriptures of each religion, to serve as the path for the evolution of Dao and De.

At present I have already produced vernacular commentaries on the Confucian Four Books and the *Liyun*, and on Laozi's *Dao De Jing* — each as a vernacular explanation. Following that, I shall produce a vernacular commentary on the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*. As for the scriptures of Christianity and Islam — our nation's predecessors have already rendered them in the vernacular — so I shall compose *Elucidations of the Christian Old and New Testaments* and *Elucidations of the Quranic Heavenly Scripture*, still entirely in vernacular explanation. Finally, I shall continue and revise the *Comprehensive Mirror of Immortals*, uniting the five great religions. I shall also unite the vanguard figures and the later schools and branches of all five great religions, gathering together the great force of compassion of all the sacred ones, immortals, and buddhas of every age and every land, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, and returning it all to Shangdi. By seeking the force of compassion from Shangdi, and by uniting all forces of compassion together, this will be sufficient to dissolve the killing qi. It will certainly close the cycle of killing and open the cycle of life, bringing the world to peace. Spears shall be cast down and Dao shall be taught. **Weapons shall be cast into farming tools.** Soldiers shall become farmers. The calamity of war shall be no more — forever. The shared happiness of peace, kinship, health, and joy shall endure — forever.

This is the small and humble wish of this young student. I wonder whether humane persons and noble-minded ones who hold compassion in their hearts consider this to be right.

Chapter 68



Translation

The good warrior takes no pride in force.
The good fighter stirs no anger.
The good victor does not contend with the enemy.
The good commander places himself beneath his men.
This is called the De of non-contention.
This is called the power of employing others.
This is called matching Heaven —
the highest since antiquity.

Word Notes

- 敵 — "**enemy / to oppose**": To resist and oppose one another; mutual antagonism.
- 合 — "**to match**": To match and combine with.

Chapter Explanation

The one who is good at being a warrior does not prize martial force. The one who is good at fighting does not give vent to anger. The one who is good at vanquishing the enemy does not use contention and killing. The one who is good at employing others places himself beneath them. This is called **the De of non-contention**. This is called **the power of employing others**. This is called **the ability to match and combine with the Dao of Heaven**. This is **the highest method known since ancient times**.

Discourse

All who possess Dao do not prize martial valor and do not delight in war. Even when they cannot avoid using military force, they are **divinely martial yet do not kill**. They repel the enemy while conversing and laughing. They meet movement with stillness. They meet the weary with ease. They overcome the strong through weakness. They conquer the hard through softness. Take the Marquis of Wu, Zhuge Liang; the Grand Tutor Xie An; Wang Yangming — all of them employed precisely this method. All of them understood the Dao of Heaven.

Otherwise, the petty courage of a common man — how could it bring peace to all under Heaven? A morning's petty wrath — how could it endure? A temperament that is flighty and impetuous — how could it prevail over others? When it comes to Dao, such things are even further off the mark.

As for employing others — one must be humble and respectful, placing oneself beneath them, so that talented people are willing to serve. If one is arrogant and self-satisfied, how would the upright and noble-minded be willing to serve? Those who do serve such a person will invariably be sycophants seeking profit and office. Would employing such people not ruin everything?

Chapter 69



Translation

In the use of troops, there is a saying:
"I dare not be the host but be the guest.
I dare not advance an inch, yet yield a foot."
This is called: marching where there is no march,
raising arms where there are no arms,
closing with an enemy who is no enemy,
grasping weapons where there are no weapons.
No calamity is greater than making light of the foe.
To make light of the foe is to nearly forfeit my treasure.
Thus when opposing forces meet,
the one who mourns shall prevail.

Word Notes

- 以 — **"to close with / to confront"**: "Because of" or "on account of," implying engagement and confrontation.
- 以 — **"to oppose"**: To resist and oppose; hostile opposition, mutual engagement.

Chapter Explanation

In the use of troops there is a vital saying: I dare not be the one who initiates hostilities but rather be the one who responds to the enemy. I dare not advance even one inch, but rather retreat a full foot. Although one deploys troops, one does not harbor a heart that delights in killing — it is as though one were not marching troops at all. Although one charges forward, it is as though one had no arms to bare. Although battle and killing follow upon one another, it is as though there were no enemy. Although one holds weapons, it is as though one held no weapons at all. Of all the calamities under Heaven, none is greater than **taking the enemy lightly and delighting in war**. To take the enemy lightly and delight in war is to **destroy the lifeblood of one's own state**. Therefore, when two armies face each other across their ramparts and engage, the one who **does not lightly open hostilities** and who **mourns at human death** — that one wins the battle.

Discourse

There are those in the world who interpret Laozi together with the *Classic of the Hidden Talisman* as works on military strategy. Looking at these several chapters, they are indeed military strategy. Not only these chapters — if one reads the entire scripture as military strategy, that too is perfectly valid. This is because Laozi's words do not fall into fixed traces. The wise see wisdom in it; the humane see humaneness in it. Take the Confucian *Book of Changes* and the first chapter of the *Analects*: depending on the time, the place, and the person, they can be interpreted in any number of ways. How could they be seen merely as military strategy?

Yet interpreting them as military strategy has deep origins. The study of Dao has its headwaters in the Yellow Emperor. Our nation's culture, along with its agriculture and manufacturing, also has its headwaters in the Yellow Emperor. Thus the study of Dao is the vanguard of all learning, and also the great method for governing the state and bringing peace to all under Heaven. In governing the state, whether to eliminate tyranny or to resist enemies, one cannot avoid using troops. Therefore the study of Dao is also the source from which military science springs. But the military science of the Daoist school is fundamentally different from that of later military specialists. The Daoist school takes retreat as advance, takes not fighting as fighting, takes not killing as victory. Its essential meaning lies in not lightly initiating hostilities and thereby bringing on the terrible calamity of war and slaughter.

I, this young student, upon close examination of its central purpose, find it is not merely compassion and magnanimity. It is that Laozi had thorough insight into the Dao of Heaven and human feeling. All who delight in war and relish killing — regardless of how strong the state or how brave the army — in the end will certainly meet with defeat. To kill others is precisely to kill oneself. To destroy others is precisely to destroy oneself. This is why one dares not do otherwise.

Let me attempt to explain by way of the Dao of Heaven and human feeling.

First, from the standpoint of the Dao of Heaven. Heaven takes its love of life as its De. The Dao of Heaven is the way of what is so of itself. It generates and brings forth the myriad beings. When any among the myriad beings grows and flourishes in excess, it begins to sustain its own life at the expense of other beings' lives. At that point, Heaven loathes its excess and puts an end to it. In truth, it is not Heaven that kills it — it kills itself.

How so? All beings receive Heaven's qi and are thereby born. All possess the De of cherishing life. The De of cherishing life is called humaneness. With humaneness, one can grow and flourish. Confucius said: "The humane are long-lived." When a being's growth reaches its peak of vigor, its vital impulse dissipates outward, and the humaneness within is lost. To lose humaneness is to lose one's Heaven-endowed nature. To lose one's Heaven-endowed nature is to die. This is why Laozi repeatedly says: "What has grown vigorous then grows old. This is called departing from Dao. What departs from Dao comes to an early end."

Moreover, Heaven's cherishing of life is a cherishing of the myriad beings — not merely the cherishing of a single being. Those who hold the cherishing of life in their hearts — Heaven assists them. Those who take killing as a glory — Heaven certainly loathes them. Those who are weak — Heaven certainly protects and shelters them. From this vantage, all who delight in war and relish violence are pursuing the path of death.

Second, from the standpoint of human feeling. No father fails to love his son and wish for his son to grow and thrive. No son fails to be filial to his father and to mourn bitterly at his father's death. If one lightly initiates hostilities, one will inevitably kill the sons of others and kill the fathers of others.

Kill a man's son — that father's love for his child is acute and utterly sincere. Being utterly sincere, his qi will be brave. He will be fierce and unafraid of death. Consider even the smallest birds and beasts — if their young are harmed without cause, they will rise up against even those they ordinarily fear. How much more so for a human being! King Tang of Shang destroyed the state of Ge because its lord killed his boy. This is precisely the reason.

Kill a man's father — that son's mourning at his father's death is extreme. Being stricken with grief, his qi will be fierce. In fury he will disregard his own life. There are those who, to avenge a father, as a lone commoner dare to assassinate the lord of ten thousand chariots. How much more so when state opposes state! Fuchai, mourning his father's death, defeated the state of Yue. This is evidence from the past.

Alas! Killing one boy brought the calamity of a state's destruction. Killing one man's father led to becoming a slave of a destroyed state. How much more so when they fight to seize a city and the slain fill the city; they fight to seize territory and the slain fill the fields! When one has killed the fathers, brothers, and sons of multitudes, can one not bring upon oneself the calamity of state-destruction and racial annihilation?

This is why Laozi says: "In compassion, go to battle and you conquer." And: "When opposing forces meet, the one who mourns shall prevail."

From these two lines of reasoning, Laozi's esteeming Dao and De and abhorring war is not pedantic and impractical. Nor is it mere soft-heartedness. To love another's state is precisely how one loves one's own state. To love another's people is precisely how one loves one's own people. Even when he has no choice but to use troops, it must be a punitive expedition to save the people — an army of compassion — not a use of military force to expand power.

Chapter 70



Translation

My words are easy to understand,
easy to put into practice.
Yet none beneath Heaven can understand them,
none can put them into practice.

Words have a root.
Affairs have a master.
It is only through not knowing this
that they do not know me.

Those who know me are few;
those who follow me are precious.
And so the Sage wears coarse cloth
and holds jade at his heart.

Word Notes

- 粗 — "**rough cloth**": A coarse, broad garment of woven animal hair — the kind worn by people of low station.

Chapter Explanation

My words are very easy to understand, very easy to put into practice. Yet none beneath Heaven can understand them, none can put them into practice. The words I speak have an ultimate root. The affairs I speak of have a master and sovereign. It is precisely because no one has grasped my root principle, my sovereign tenet, that they do not know me. Those who know me are few — and so my Dao is all the more precious. For this reason, the Sage wears coarse cloth — the garb of a lowly person — on the outside, yet holds jade at his heart. How hard it is for people to perceive this!

Discourse

Laozi's words, in their broad purport, simply urge reverence for Dao and De, abhorrence of war and battle, and the practice of clarity, stillness, and non-contention. These are the most level, the most ordinary of principles — easy to understand and easy to put into practice. Yet people of the world either dismiss them as pedantic and useless, or exalt them as something mystically extraordinary; or they apply them narrowly, treating them merely as a technique for personal cultivation; or they look at them askance, branding them outright as heterodox teachings. All of these people see only the coarse cloth on the outside and fail to see the jade held at the heart.

Whether the people of the world know Laozi or not is of no great consequence in itself — it is a matter of the gravest consequence for the whole world. If there were truly someone who grasped his genuine root principle of revering Dao and De and abhorring war and battle — and understood that it is not pedantic and useless, but contains real principle — and took it up and put it to the test, it would truly be a blessing for every nation on the globe.

Chapter 71



Translation

To know yet seem not to know — this is the highest.
Not to know yet think you know — this is a sickness.
Only by recognizing sickness as sickness
does one become free of it.
The Sage is free of sickness
because he recognizes sickness as sickness.
And so he is free of sickness.

Word Notes

- 病 — "**sickness**": Harm, affliction.

Chapter Explanation

To know yet not regard oneself as knowing — this is the highest. Not to know yet regard oneself as knowing — this is a great sickness. Only the one who recognizes sickness as sickness can be free of sickness. The Sage is free of sickness precisely because he recognizes sickness as sickness; therefore he is free of sickness.

Discourse

Confucius once admonished Zilu, saying: "To know what you know and to know what you do not know — this is true knowledge." This is roughly similar to the meaning of this chapter. But Laozi's words go a step further.

Yet Laozi has another meaning as well. In times when all under Heaven is in chaos, right and wrong are necessarily jumbled together, and perverse theories run rampant. Those who know say they know; those who do not know also say they know. They go so far as to issue pronouncements and compose books. They themselves do not understand, yet they lead others into confusion. They carry a sickness of which they are unaware, and still they would infect all the people under Heaven. The disorder reaches such a point that even those with true insight can find no peace of body or mind. Those who are free of sickness are equally helpless. It very nearly makes every nation under Heaven a nation of the confused, and every person a patient.

This is why Laozi explains it repeatedly — to teach people to examine themselves and cure their own sickness.

I, this young student, in annotating this chapter, feel deeply moved. For I myself am already one who does not understand. Because the people of the world have overused their cleverness, I have become all the more confused. I myself am already a person of softness and weakness. Because the people of the world are fond of war and killing, I have developed a growing sickness of the heart.

I know that among the people of the world there must be those who share my affliction and feel the same compassion. Where can I find a good and wise teacher to dispel my foolish delusion? Where a great physician to attend to my sickness of the heart?

Chapter 72



Translation

When the people do not fear authority,
a greater authority will come.
Do not crowd them in their dwellings.
Do not oppress them in their living.
Only by not oppressing
will one not be oppressed.
Therefore the Sage knows himself but does not parade himself,
loves himself but does not exalt himself.
He sets aside the one and takes up the other.

Word Notes

- 威 — "**authority**": Punitive authority, the intimidating power of the state.
- 足 — "**weary / to sate**": Sufficient, sated; interchangeable with "glutted" or "to have one's fill."

Chapter Explanation

Lead by Dao and De, and the people will have no need to fear punitive authority. They will naturally know reverence. In this way, without displaying anger, the ruler's authority is awe-inspiring — a great authority arrives of its own accord.

Therefore those who govern the state should not rely on their power to oppress the people. They should not glut themselves on the pleasures of sound, color, goods, and profit to nourish their own lives. Precisely by not seeking to sate themselves on sound, color, goods, and profit, they will be filled without seeking fullness and can renew themselves daily.

For this reason, the Sage seeks only self-knowledge, not self-display. He seeks only self-love, not self-exaltation. Therefore he sets aside the one — insatiable grasping — and takes up the other — humility and non-contention.

Discourse

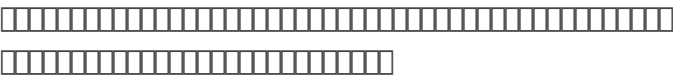
All those who are fond of war and killing: outwardly they rely on military might to carve up all under Heaven, and inwardly they rely on punitive authority to slaughter their own people. They rely on the power of arms, acting with such cruelty and heartlessness, for no purpose other than to fill the pit of their desires — seeking to sate their ears with music, their eyes with color, their bodies with soft warmth, their mouths with rich delicacies. Beyond this, they would swallow up all under Heaven and make the myriad nations pay tribute, boasting of their fame and exalting their persons.

Consider the First Emperor of Qin, so self-aggrandizing that he believed himself to surpass even the Two Emperors and Three Kings. He seized the finest treasures of the six conquered states, built the vast Epang Palace, and carried off the women, children, jade, and silk of the six states to fill its chambers — all in pursuit of pleasures of the flesh-self.

They do not realize that those who rely on military might and political power to intimidate people — though people cannot help but be afraid — once that power is lost, it is like a tiger stripped of its claws and teeth; no one fears it any longer. Consider Napoleon: in the days of his ascendancy, the nations of Europe trembled before him. Yet once he lost his military power, he died a prisoner on a lonely island. Who feared him then?

Only the noble person who is divinely martial yet does not kill — without anger, yet more awe-inspiring to the people than the executioner's axe — possesses Heavenly rank and true nobility, which surpasses the authority of arms and punishment ten thousand times over.

Chapter 73



Translation

Courage in daring leads to killing.
Courage in not-daring leads to life.
Of these two, one benefits, the other harms.
What Heaven finds hateful —
who truly knows the reason?
Even the Sage regards this with care.
The Dao of Heaven does not contend, yet excels at overcoming;
does not speak, yet excels at answering;
does not summon, yet all things arrive of themselves;
is unhurried, yet excels at planning.
The net of Heaven is vast, vast —
wide-meshed, and yet nothing slips through.

Word Notes

- 𡗗 — "**unhurried**": Relaxed, slow.
- 𡗗 — "**vast**": Immense, great.
- 𡗗 — "**wide [mesh]**": Sparse, loose.

Chapter Explanation

One who is courageous in rashness and the desire to prevail kills others. One who is courageous in not-daring, abiding in softness and lowliness, gives life to others. Of these two, one benefits people and the other harms them — this much people can know. But what Heaven finds hateful — the courageous who kill — who truly knows the reason? Even the Sage regards courage and daring with care.

The Dao of Heaven does not contend with people, yet it excels at overcoming. It does not speak, yet there is a response that follows naturally. It does not summon, yet things come of their own accord. Though exceedingly unhurried, it excels at planning. The net of Heaven is vast and immense; though its mesh is exceedingly wide, nothing slips through.

Discourse

The power of life and death is the great prerogative of Heaven. The Sage embodies Heaven and carries out Dao; his rewards and punishments are utterly impartial. This is to act as Heaven's agent in giving life and dealing death.

But if instead one kills to fatten oneself and harms others to benefit oneself, then when Heaven would give life, man goes ahead and kills. How could Heaven not find this utterly hateful?

Those who dare to kill surely believe that "the strong devour the weak" is a universal law of natural evolution. And they think Heaven, being without sound or scent, is incapable of reward or punishment. They do not realize that though Heaven does not speak, retribution arrives of itself. Its retribution may seem lenient, but in truth it is utterly rigorous — not a hair's breadth is out of place. No one has the power to escape it.

For the Dao of Heaven is the natural order. All the natural consequences that arise in human affairs are the workings of the Dao of Heaven. No one makes it so, yet it is as if someone did.

The rewards and punishments of Heaven being so rigorous — what need is there for men to be so eager to kill?

Chapter 74



Translation

When the people no longer fear death,
what good is it to threaten them with death?
If the people could be made always to fear death,
and we seized the deviant and put them to death,
who then would dare?
There is always one whose office it is to kill.
To kill in place of this executioner
is to hew wood in place of the master carpenter.
Of those who hew in place of the master carpenter,
few escape cutting their own hands.

Word Notes

- 匠 — "**carpenter**": A woodworker.
- 斲 — "**to hew**": To chop open wood.

Chapter Explanation

The people are not afraid to die. How then can those who govern insist on using death to frighten them? If you could make the people always fear death, then the ones who act in strange and lawless ways — I could seize and execute them, and who would dare commit lawless acts again? But the more you kill, the more such people appear. Clearly the people do not fear death.

Moreover, when the people have committed crimes, there is always a judicial authority who executes them according to public law. Yet there are those who would replace that authority and kill on their own private authority. This is like someone who does not understand the compass and square yet presumes to hew wood in place of the master carpenter. Those who hew wood in place of the master carpenter rarely escape cutting their own hands.

Discourse

When the Sage transforms all under Heaven through Dao and De, he causes the people to understand the root of reverence. They naturally become as if ten eyes were watching them, ten

hands pointing at them. They are watchful in what others cannot see and apprehensive in what others cannot hear. If they exercise such care even in what is hidden and subtle, how much less will they commit crimes and foment rebellion in the open! What need is there to rely on penal law?

Moreover, using penal law to kill and suppress the populace — the people are not afraid of it. It is not that the people do not fear death by nature. It is that times of harsh punishment are necessarily times of chaos. The people cannot get through a single day without hardship, and they have nowhere to put their hands and feet. Having lost all hope of living, how would they fear death?

Furthermore, those who administer punishments are not necessarily free of manipulating the law to serve private ends. When the penal law itself is unjust, the people refuse to fear it all the more. Even if they did fear it, it would be hard to avoid falling into the legal net. And so people come to see breaking the law and fomenting rebellion as a path to survival, and keeping the law and living quietly as simply waiting to die. The result is mutual slaughter, and great upheaval erupts.

Alas! Even Confucius said, "Lead them with policies and align them with punishments, and the people will evade trouble but have no sense of shame" — and that was merely a warning about insufficient governance. How much worse to lead them by indiscriminate slaughter, to align them with brutality and cruelty! How could all under Heaven not be thrown into chaos?

Chapter 75



Translation

The people's hunger —
it is because those above consume too much in taxes.
This is why they hunger.

The people being hard to govern —
it is because those above are addicted to action.
This is why they are hard to govern.

The people making light of death —
it is because the nourishing of life is made too lavish.
This is why they make light of death.

Only those who do not make life their preoccupation
are wiser than those who prize it.

Word Notes

- 税 — **"taxes"**: The levies and tribute paid by the people.

Chapter Explanation

The people's hunger is because their superiors consume too much tax revenue. The strength of the people is exhausted; therefore they go hungry. The people being hard to govern is because their superiors employ scheming techniques of active governance. The people respond with a hundred kinds of trickery; therefore they are hard to govern. The people making light of death is because their appetite for pleasure has been given free rein and the materials for nourishing life are too lavish — their resources are inadequate; therefore they make light of death.

Only those who do not take the nourishing of life as their paramount concern are truly skilled at honoring their life.

Discourse

This past summer, I, this young student, read the last testament of Mr. Liang Juchuan, who gave his life as a martyr to principle. He wrote: "The livelihood of the people grows desperate under the burdens they bear. In the villages of the four quarters, living conditions are such that people and livestock are nearly equal. Yet in the cities, people chat and laugh and pursue their pleasures, prizing refinement and hygiene — truly a lamentable thing." He further wrote: "Unless one resorts to cunning schemes and deceitful stratagems, there is no way to survive."

I believe Mr. Liang's words cut directly to the heart of our present ills — they are truly a righteous argument for saving the world. When I came to annotate this chapter, I realized that Mr. Liang's words secretly accord with Laozi, and that Laozi's formulation is even more precise and penetrating.

Examining Laozi's main idea closely, the weight rests on the single phrase "the nourishing of life is made too lavish." For the people's hunger comes from those above consuming too much in taxes, and the excessive consumption of taxes comes from lavish life-nourishing.

How so? The taxes paid to the state were originally meant for public expenditures. When the state spends more, naturally more must be collected — this is a duty the people ought to fulfill. But Laozi does not say "those above *use* too much in taxes"; he says "those above *consume* too much in taxes." This plainly refers to the state maintaining a host of parasitic officials — as the *Great Learning* puts it, "the consumers are many." They strip away the fat and marrow of the people to feed their palaces, wives and concubines, their eating and drinking, their sounds and colors — all to nourish their own lives.

Thus those above set the example and those below follow it. Everyone lavishly nourishes their life. Even the lowliest laborers learn to smoke paper cigarettes, drink expensive tea, wear silken clothes, and eat rich food.

They do not realize that material resources are finite but human desire is boundless. The sources of wealth will inevitably run dry. When the sources of wealth run dry, those above levy upon the people — but even that does not suffice. When it does not suffice, they invent new names and categories to extract more, using legal power to take from the people and political scheming to deal with the people. The people too respond with scheming. And so a hundred kinds of trickery emerge — just as Mr. Liang said: "Unless one resorts to cunning schemes and deceitful stratagems, there is no way to survive."

In this condition: is it better to follow the upright way and die in poverty, or to use deceitful schemes and perhaps live? Even if one uses deceitful schemes and dies taking risks, at least one has had some pleasure. Whether you choose good or ill, it is all death — who still fears death?

If a noble person does not fear death, no danger or hardship will he avoid. If a petty person does not fear death, there is no great upheaval he will not dare set in motion. When great upheaval comes, there is mutual slaughter. And so everyone's devotion to nourishing life is precisely what kills them.

Alas, how painful! How much better to use virtue to adorn the self and use righteousness to nourish one's qi! That alone is truly to care well for one's life — truly to honor one's life.

Chapter 76



Translation

When a person is alive, the body is soft and supple.
In death, it is stiff and rigid.
When grasses and trees are alive, they are soft and tender.
In death, they are dry and brittle.

Therefore the stiff and rigid are companions of death;
the soft and supple are companions of life.

Thus an army that grows too strong will not prevail;
a tree that grows too rigid will be felled.
The strong and great dwell below;
the soft and supple dwell above.

Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**felled**": Read as gong. A tree grown rigid enough that its trunk can be encircled with clasped hands — and so it is cut down for timber.

Chapter Explanation

When a person is alive, the body is soft and supple; when dead, the body becomes stiff and rigid. When grasses and trees are alive, they are soft and tender; when dead, they are dry and withered. Therefore the stiff and rigid are companions of death, and the soft and supple are companions of life.

For this reason, when an army is overly strong, a twilight air sets in and it cannot prevail. When a tree has grown strong, its trunk reaches the girth that can be clasped by the arms — and people fell it for timber. The strong and great dwell below; the soft and supple dwell above.

Discourse

The principle of dwelling contentedly in softness and weakness, never contending for superiority, has already been discussed many times. This chapter sets forth the underlying reason once more.

Whatever has grown overly strong and dominant has thereby taken the path of death. All beings are like this; none can escape it. Therefore one who has grown strong must not remain in that position of strength. Only then can one endure.

Chapter 77



Translation

Is not the Dao of Heaven like the drawing of a bow?

What is high, it presses down;

what is low, it raises up.

What has surplus, it diminishes;

what is deficient, it supplements.

The Dao of Heaven

diminishes the surplus and supplements the deficient.

The Dao of humans is not so —

it diminishes the deficient to serve the surplus.

Who can take what is surplus and offer it to all under Heaven?

Only those who possess Dao.

Thus the Sage acts but does not rely on what he has done;

he achieves merit but does not dwell in it.

He has no wish to display his worthiness.

Word Notes

- 上 — **"to draw/raise"**: To lift upward, referring to raising the bow from its resting position.
- 下 — **"to press down"**: To lower, to make crouch down.

Chapter Explanation

The Dao of Heaven is like the form of a bow being drawn. What is high, it presses down. What is low, it raises up. What has surplus, it diminishes. What is deficient, it supplements. The Dao of Heaven diminishes the surplus to supplement the deficient. The Dao of humans is not so — it diminishes the deficient to serve the surplus. Who can take what is surplus and offer it to all under Heaven? Only the person who possesses Dao. For this reason, the Sage acts yet does not rely upon his accomplishments. He achieves merit yet does not claim credit. Is it that he has no wish to display his worthiness? No — it is that he diminishes his own surplus to supplement the deficiency of all under Heaven.

Discourse

A bow is semicircular in form. When placed lying down in its resting position, the bow's back faces upward — that is the high part — and the bow's tips face downward — that is the low part. Now draw it and hold it up: the bow's back goes downward and becomes low; the bow's tips go upward and become high. This single inversion is Heaven's Dao diminishing the surplus and supplementing the deficient — making what is high go low, and what is low go high.

Moreover, the raised and the lowered, placed together, form a complete circle. This is the fundamental form of Heaven's Dao. Once it is round, it can circulate and flow without obstruction, with no distinction between above and below. Were it not so — if one used only one side — the high would grow ever higher and the low ever lower, and the transformations of qi would reach their limit.

This world has already been ruined by contention. Therefore the Sage, having achieved merit, does not dwell in it but withdraws from the scene. He acts without relying upon what he has done. Of course this is because he has no wish to display his worthiness. But it is also because he accords with the naturalness of Heaven's Dao, diminishing his own surplus to supplement the deficiency of all under Heaven. Were it otherwise — like the people of this world who diminish the deficient to serve the surplus — they would inevitably be diminished by Heaven's Dao and could not endure for long.

Chapter 78



Translation

In all under Heaven, nothing is softer than water,
yet in attacking the hard and the strong,
nothing can surpass it —
for nothing can take its place.

That the soft overcomes the hard,
the weak overcomes the strong —
there is no one under Heaven who does not know this,
yet no one can put it into practice.

Therefore the Sage says:
"One who bears the filth of the state
is called the lord of the altars of soil and grain.
One who bears the calamities of the state
is called the sovereign of all under Heaven."

Straight words seem paradoxical.

Word Notes

- 攻 — **"to attack"**: To assault, to batter.
- 穢 — **"filth"**: Grime, defilement.
- 土神 — **"altar of the earth god"**: The earth deity.
- 谷神 — **"altar of the grain god"**: The grain deity.

Chapter Explanation

Of all things soft and weak under Heaven, nothing is softer or weaker than water. And yet in attacking the hard and the strong, nothing can surpass it. This is because water by its nature flows downward, and nothing can change this. Therefore the soft can overcome the hard, and the weak can overcome the strong. No one under Heaven does not know this, yet no one is able to put it into practice. Therefore the Sage said: "One who bears the filth of the entire state is called the lord of the altars of soil and grain. One who bears the calamities of the entire state is called the sovereign of all under Heaven." These are straight words, yet they seem to say the opposite.

Discourse

To bear humiliation and place oneself beneath others, to abide in softness and weakness — this is what people loathe. They do not understand that only what is softest and weakest can overcome what is hardest and strongest.

Just look at water and you will understand. Among all things under Heaven, the hard can be broken and the strong can be weakened. But water has already reached the extreme of softness and weakness — there is no way to destroy it further.

Therefore, a person who abides in softness and weakness, who can bear humiliation and place himself beneath others, must possess the capacity for tolerance. One who does not shy away from danger and hardship must possess the capacity for shouldering responsibility.

Such a person can serve as the lord of the state and the sovereign of all under Heaven. He is certain to pursue well-being for the state and all under Heaven.

Chapter 79



Translation

Reconcile a great enmity —
lingering enmity remains.
How can this be called good?

Therefore the Sage holds the left tally
yet presses no claim upon others.

Those who possess De attend to the tally;
those who lack De attend to the tax levy.

The Dao of Heaven plays no favorites —
it is always with the good.

Word Notes

- 左券 — "**the left tally**": A contract written across the seam of two pieces, split into left and right halves. The left half serves as the creditor's stub. The holder of the left tally waits for the other party to come and match tallies; he does not go seeking people out.
- 稅 — "**the tax levy**": The method of collecting taxes in the Zhou system. One who calculates amounts and exacts from people.

Chapter Explanation

When a great enmity has been reconciled, although it may appear reconciled on the outside, lingering enmity must remain within. How then can this be called good?

For this reason the Sage holds the left tally, waiting for people to come and seek a match, rather than going out to press claims upon others. Therefore, one who possesses De is like holding a tally — people naturally come seeking the match. One who lacks De is like managing tax collection — going out to exact from people, and people are not pleased.

Moreover, when people unite of their own accord, there is Dao within it. Heaven bestows, and people return of their own accord. But the Dao of Heaven plays no favorites — it is always with the good.

Discourse

This chapter honors the kingly way and denounces hegemonic techniques.

Throughout the ages, all who acted as hegemons among the feudal lords necessarily relied on military force. First they used military intimidation to overawe others, and only then did they negotiate peace. Having relied on military intimidation, there could not but have been killing and wounding. Killing others is what people most bitterly resent — this is the greatest enmity. To forge such enmity and then negotiate peace: can this peace be called good?

Moreover, those who use hegemonic techniques are not truly advocates of peace. They merely negotiate peace so that others will grow close and let down their guard. Then they can devise all manner of clever methods to absorb others' rights — and that is all.

Consider Laozi's single phrase: **"those who lack De attend to the tax levy."** This truly captures the entirety of the hegemon-states' deceitful stratagems.

Yet since it is reconciliation born of enmity, and after reconciliation they again absorb others' rights — how can such peace succeed? It must inevitably fracture. The very moment of negotiating peace is precisely the starting point of future wars and slaughter.

This is why, after the Five Hegemons of the feudal states, the era became the Warring States. People only know that the seven great powers were cruel and inhumane; they see them as the sinners produced by the Five Hegemons. They do not realize that this calamity of war was already gestating during the time when the Five Hegemons were assembling the feudal lords.

Were it not so, why would even a five-foot youth of the Confucian school be ashamed to speak of the Five Hegemons? It is not because they grandly discuss the kingly way and look down upon utilitarian achievement. It is truly because, from principle alone one may deduce that using hegemonic techniques must inevitably brew the disaster of war. Therefore they cannot bear to speak of it and dare not speak of it.

Even without speaking, later generations still secretly appropriated their techniques of power. If one were to further praise their achievements, then everyone would imitate them, and the proper way would be lost. Would that not be terrible?

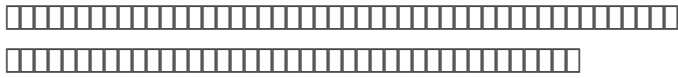
Furthermore, to use hegemonic deception against others is something the Dao of Heaven does not permit. How so? The Dao of Heaven is the natural Dao. The hegemon kills people through military force and robs people of their interests through scheming — these are things people naturally detest. What people detest, Heaven also naturally detests. When Heaven and people both detest a thing, failure naturally follows.

How different is one who possesses De! He cultivates De and practices humaneness. Without seeking outwardly to reconcile with others, Heaven bestows and people return of their own accord. Consider King Wen, who treated people with humaneness and generosity: afterward, when King Wu was at the Mengjin ford, without any prearranged assembly, eight hundred and more states came

of their own accord and collectively proclaimed King Wu as the Son of Heaven.

Is this not stronger beyond measure than forcing matters through the mixed deceptions of hegemony?

Chapter 80



Translation

A small state, few people —
let them have implements for tens and hundreds, yet never use them.
Let the people hold death close and not wander far.

Though boats and carriages exist,
none has reason to ride them.
Though armor and weapons exist,
none has reason to deploy them.

Let the people return to knotting cords.
Sweeten their food,
beautify their clothing,
give them peace in their dwellings,
give them joy in their customs.

Neighboring states lie within sight of one another —
the crowing of roosters, the barking of dogs
carry between them —
yet the people, from youth to old age,
never once visit.

Word Notes

- 徙 — "**to move/migrate**": To relocate.

Chapter Explanation

Let all the states under Heaven become small states. Reduce their populations. Teach them so that they have ten kinds, a hundred kinds of implements and yet do not use them recklessly. Teach these people to know how to hold life and death in reverence and not to migrate to distant places. Even if they have boats and carriages, there is no reason to ride them. Even if they have military uniforms and weapons, there is no reason to deploy them. Teach these people to return to the ways of high antiquity, using knotted cords to keep records.

Sweeten people's food and drink. Beautify people's clothing. Give peace to people's dwellings. Give harmony and joy to people's customs. Neighboring states see one another; the sounds of roosters and dogs are heard between them; yet the people, from youth to old age, do not visit one another.

Discourse

I, this young student, upon reaching this chapter in my commentary, could not help but dance for joy and declare: truly wondrous beyond measure! Truly wondrous beyond measure!

But people of this world do not understand. They will surely think that in today's age of global interconnection, the words of this chapter are utterly inapplicable. They do not realize that this chapter contains two kinds of principle — one that is most applicable precisely in an age of interconnection, and one that is applicable not only in an age of interconnection but will remain applicable even when civilization has advanced for thousands, ten thousands, a million years.

Let me try to explain.

The first: the principle of lament. The more interconnected the world becomes, the more savage the calamities of war. The wider the scope of interconnection, the larger the battlefields. The more convenient trains and steamships become, the more convenient also the transport of troops and supplies. Moreover, after interconnection: sometimes preaching provokes disaster; sometimes commerce provokes disaster; sometimes opening colonial territories provokes disaster. Once the calamity of war arises, the suffering is too cruel to bear describing.

With Laozi's divine sagacity, he had long foreseen this. Therefore he put forth the thesis of this chapter. He was not teaching people to abandon eating for fear of choking. He was deliberately speaking words that seem absurd, concealing within them boundless lament — to mock people, to shock people awake. If people could feel moved and awaken, the calamity of war could cease.

This principle, applied to the age of interconnection, can rescue us from the cruel disaster of armed warfare.

The second: the principle of evolution. When states are large, their power is great, and they often rely upon their strength to bully others. When populations are large, they become difficult to govern. And large populations inevitably mean large armies. If states were divided into equal nations — with no distinctions of large and small, for such distinctions only arise from comparison — and their populations reduced, then not only would states have no desire to annex others, and the people would be free from complexity and trouble, but with fewer people there would be fewer affairs. Only a simple government need be established, without the need to create many bureaucratic organs and squander gold and silver. Expenditures would therefore also be small.

Thus reducing the number of births is the marvelous method of addressing the root and clearing the source for governing all under Heaven.

Consider: whenever all under Heaven enjoys a brief peace, it is always after a great upheaval, when the population is sparse. Once peace comes, reproduction gradually increases. As

reproduction increases, resources become strained. From this strain, contention arises. Moreover, when a single set of parents bears several children, they cannot even keep up with feeding and clothing them — how could they have the strength to educate them? Difficulty in food and clothing is still a small matter. Not receiving a basic education, an entire lifetime spent in muddled confusion, as if dwelling in a dark hell — this is truly pitiable. And if they receive no education, can they still understand humaneness, righteousness, and moral principle? Add to this the difficulty of earning a livelihood, and they will inevitably break the law and create disorder. On the small scale, bandits swarm like bees; on the great scale, wars follow one upon another. This is the root cause of great chaos under Heaven.

Only reducing the number of births can preserve lasting peace in the world.

But this principle must come about naturally. It requires that the people's moral character and knowledge have all advanced to a high level — that they be pure, simple, honest, and generous, with desires gradually diminishing. Men would not marry until after age twenty-five; if they already have an heir, they would not remarry after the wife's death. Women would not marry until after age twenty-five; even without an heir, they would not remarry after the husband's death. The institution of one husband and one wife would be practiced in reality. From the sovereign above to the common people below, none would be permitted to take concubines. Husband and wife would treat each other with the respect due a guest, not drowning in indulgent desire. They would merely produce an heir so as to be free from the great sin of lacking posterity.

Husband and wife would both study the Daoist *Cantong qi* (*The Kinship of the Three*) and the Buddhist *Shurangama Sutra*, cultivating essence, qi, and spirit — to the point of attaining immortality or Buddhahood. Thereupon they would sever desire completely. In this way, each couple would produce only one son and one daughter to continue the line. With reproduction so reduced, rearing and education would naturally become easy.

Moreover, when people's desires are few, the children born to them would be physically robust with no early deaths, and mentally keen with no dullness. Thus the more civilization advances, the higher the caliber of persons becomes. Everyone would possess the conduct of a virtuous gentleman.

But by that time, there would be no degraded underclass, nor anyone performing hard manual labor or drudgery. Therefore each person would need to have ten kinds, a hundred kinds of machines — all hard labor and drudgery would no longer require human hands. Yet even with such convenience, because people would all be temperate and free of desire, they would not lightly use them, lest material resources be exhausted.

The people of that time would all devote themselves to inner cultivation and the pursuit of spiritual learning. When a task is finished, they would retire to solitary dwelling to nourish the spirit. They would prefer stillness and not prefer movement. Moreover, everyone would have a fixed livelihood, so there would be no vagrants. Therefore, though trains and steamships exist, they would only be used for transporting goods and conveying what one has and what one lacks — and that is all. As for military uniforms and weapons, there would be no need to transport them; they would simply be stored in the national treasury.

At this time, although scholarship would be extremely thorough, people would only silently grasp the essential meaning and would not recite or memorize written phrases. Even for spreading civilization, they would only use simple diagrams to convey meaning — like the Eight Trigrams of antiquity — or write a few simple and clear sentences. For the caliber of people being so high, one glance would suffice to understand; there would be no need for writings that run on page after page, full of ornamental rhetoric that is empty and useless.

As for contracts and evidence, none of these would be needed. All people would be true and sincere without duplicity, trusting one another by the heart. What use would such things have?

When Laozi speaks of returning to knotted cords, he is merely speaking in the most extreme terms to say: do not value empty formalities — and that is all.

The people's food and drink would all consist of grains and vegetables. (When Laozi says "sweeten their food," this means precisely the savor that comes from tilling and harvesting.) They would not eat meat or fish, because all things grow together without harming one another. Moreover, everyone would practice inner cultivation. Like the contemporary Dr. Wu Tingfang, who considers eating meat to be impure and does not eat it.

The people's clothing would all be fine and beautiful, seeking only what benefits the body — they would not want extravagance. They would be at peace in their dwellings and take joy in their customs, not reaching for what is high and seeking what is far, not chasing the new and craving the strange. Though neighboring states lie within sight of one another and the crowing of roosters and barking of dogs carry between them, still they would grow old and die without ever once visiting.

But this "never once visiting" is not being confined to one small corner, gazing at the sky from the bottom of a well. It is because the people's degree of evolution is so high that they can fully exhaust the heart and know their nature. All things are complete within one's own person. Their flood-like qi fills all between Heaven and Earth. The heart of Dao permeates beyond the six directions. The spirit roams the Great Void. They arrive without traveling. They are swift without haste. They see all the worlds of Heaven and Earth as if in the palm of their hand. (I have previously authored *Diagrams of the Great Thousand*, and I am able to see all of this within my own inherent nature.)

At that time, the human world would simply be Heaven — there would be no boundary between the human and the celestial. That is why they need not visit one another.

But such evolution is natural. If one tries to force it before the time is right, one will surely invite great disaster. It must follow the proper sequence. Even to begin would require at least several hundred years. For evolution to reach its ultimate culmination, no less than a thousand years or more would be needed.

This principle — however many years of evolution have passed — remains valid. Is Laozi's ideal of evolution not supremely lofty?

Chapter 81



Translation

Trustworthy words are not beautiful;
beautiful words are not trustworthy.
Good words need no argument;
argumentative words are not good.
Those who know are not broadly learned;
the broadly learned do not truly know.

The Sage does not accumulate.
The more he lives for others, the more he has.
The more he gives, the more he possesses.

The Dao of Heaven: to benefit, never to harm.
The Dao of the Sage: to act, never to contend.

Word Notes

- 广 — "**broadly [learned]**": Wide, extensive.

Chapter Explanation

Trustworthy words are not refined and beautiful. Refined and beautiful words are not trustworthy. Good words do not require argument. Words of argument are not good. One who truly knows does not seek broad learning. One who seeks broad learning may not necessarily know.

For this reason, the Sage does not seek to accumulate everything upon his own person. Though he does not seek to accumulate upon himself, because he lives for others, he himself grows ever richer. Because he gives to others, he himself grows ever more abundant.

The Dao of Heaven benefits the myriad beings and does not harm them. The Dao of the Sage takes all the affairs of the cosmos as matters within his own nature and shoulders all responsibility, yet does not contend with others.

Discourse

Confucius said: "One's words need not always be trustworthy; one's actions need not always bear fruit." The Buddha, too, often used expedient teachings in preaching the Dharma. From this we can see that the ancient sages did not rigidly cling to trustworthiness. But the sages were not deceiving people. It was for the sake of transforming and ferrying all beings — teaching in accordance with each person's capacity. Had they spoken the true principle directly, people would not have been able to believe it. Since people could not believe it, the sages had no choice but to proceed as they did. But this kind of non-trustworthiness is the idea of teaching through expedient adaptation.

What Laozi says — **"trustworthy words are not beautiful"** — goes a step further.

For trustworthiness is the name of the teaching that is most earnest and solid. Trustworthiness belongs to the element earth; deep De is sufficient to bear all things. Moreover, it contains true humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom within it.

Therefore, in Confucius's teachings, it is in the era of the Great Unity that one first speaks of "practicing trust and cultivating harmony." Laozi, in places where he disparages humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom, never disparages trustworthiness. Only in this chapter does he say "trustworthy words are not beautiful" — which seems different from what came before.

What people do not realize is this: the earlier emphasis on trustworthiness was spoken for the era when the Great Unity is first inaugurated. This statement that "trustworthy words are not beautiful" is spoken for the era when the Great Unity has evolved to its ultimate extreme.

For at that time, everyone would already practice trust and cultivate harmony. Then a further evolution must occur: even trustworthiness itself would no longer be needed. When people devote themselves to trustworthiness, there arises a calculating mind about how to establish trust — this inevitably falls into attachment to marks. Therefore even trustworthiness must be cast off. People would simply act from their innate nature and move at Heaven's impulse, no longer knowing what trustworthy or untrustworthy means. Whatever should be said, they say; whatever should be done, they do. Not only would they have no mind to establish trust in themselves, they would have no mind to demand trust of others. Everyone would simply forget one another's merit and be joyful together.

This at last reaches the realm of divine transformation.

The phrases earlier in this chapter — **"good words need no argument"** and **"those who know are not broadly learned"** — all carry this same meaning. Were one to take post-celestial reasoning to discuss this, how could it ever be understood?

But evolving to this level is by no means easy. It requires a great sage to emerge several thousand years beforehand and begin to advocate: taking the affairs of the cosmos as matters within one's own nature; possessing a capacity for shouldering responsibility as rich as Yi Yin's; embodying the Dao of Heaven that benefits all under Heaven without harming it; in all things living for others, not for oneself; giving to others, not seeking precedence. Only in this way can it gradually be brought about.

I, this young student, humbly believe that the present time is precisely the era of practicing trust and cultivating harmony. It is also an era when heterodox doctrines run rampant and right and wrong must be distinguished. It is an era when the teachings of all lands and all ages lie jumbled together, needing to be integrated and unified.

Laozi's several phrases about beautiful words not being trustworthy — these must still wait for a future day to be put into practice.

But the words about living for others and not for oneself, giving to others and not seeking precedence, shouldering the affairs of all under Heaven and all ages, embodying the Dao of Heaven in benefiting others without harming them — **these are the exact medicine for today's ailment. There is not a moment to lose.**