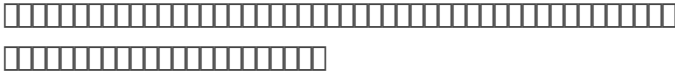


# Chapter 1



## Translation

Dao that can be spoken is not the enduring Dao.  
A name that can be named is not the enduring name.  
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;  
the named is the mother of the myriad beings.  
In true emptiness, free of desire, one beholds its marvel;  
in wondrous existence, stirred by intention, one discerns its threshold.  
These two arise from the same source yet bear different names —  
both may be called mysterious.  
Mysterious, and again more deeply so:  
the gate from which all marvels issue.

## Word Notes

- 道 — "**Dao**": Dao means principle. It encompasses cosmic order and the ground of all reason.
- 可 — "**can be spoken**": means it can be articulated in words.
- 常 — "**constant**": means permanently abiding and indestructible.
- 名 — "**name**": means name-and-form — the conceptual image that a name designates.
- 可 — "**can be named**": means it can be marked or designated.
- 妙 — "**marvel**": means numinous wonder.
- 阈 — "**threshold**": means the critical juncture — not "boundary" but a keyhole or pivot, the precise point where something works or opens.
- 玄 — "**mysterious**": means deep and far-reaching.

## Chapter Explanation

Any Dao that can be articulated in words is not the permanently abiding, indestructible Dao. Any name that can be marked or designated is not the permanently abiding, indestructible name. **The nameless** is the origin from which Heaven and Earth are born. **The named** is the mother from which the myriad beings are born. Therefore, being one with Dao — abiding in constant true emptiness, free of thought and intention — one observes the marvel of Dao. Dwelling in constant wondrous existence, with thought and intention, one observes the threshold of Dao. These two — true emptiness and wondrous existence — both emerge from the unspeakable Dao, yet they bear

different names. Both may be called deep and unfathomable. Deep and unfathomable, then yet more deeply unfathomable: this is the gateway from which all marvels issue.

## Discourse

This chapter teaches that Dao is the original source of Heaven and Earth and the myriad beings. De is the movement and turning of Dao. What Laozi speaks of as Dao and De proceeds from the standpoint of the pre-celestial void — numinously wondrous and beyond fathoming, without sound, without scent, impossible to seize or grasp. Confucius called him "like a dragon" — this was praise for his Dao and De. Like a dragon that now lurks, now leaps, now appears, now hides, whose transformations are impossible to predict, whose presence and absence cannot be known. His way of setting down words is likewise: if you cling to the post-celestial, to principles with form and substance, how can you ever glimpse so much as a single scale or claw of this dragon?

Yet though Laozi's words proceed from the standpoint of the pre-celestial void, they are at once supremely empty and supremely real, supremely without and supremely with. They possess substance and function, root and branch. This is not the kind of emptiness and nothingness that is useless.

Take this very chapter: it says that the true and enduring Dao cannot be spoken in words — "Dao" is merely a name provisionally and forcibly assigned. Since Dao cannot be spoken, neither can a name be forcibly imposed upon it. This is emptiness and nothingness, to be sure. Yet it is precisely because there is an unspeakable Dao that all speakable daos are born from it; precisely because there is an unnameable name that all nameable names are born from it. It is the origin of Heaven and Earth, the mother of the myriad beings. This is emptiness and nothingness that is not empty and nothing. Yet although it is not empty nothingness, the Dao from which Heaven, Earth, and the myriad beings are born can still neither be seen nor heard. It remains a having that does not have — having that returns to nothing. This is why these two — having and not-having — emerge from the same source yet bear different names, and both are mysterious beyond fathoming.

Human beings receive the full substance of Dao. Therefore one must embody Dao's naturalness. In true emptiness, observe the marvel of Dao. In wondrous existence, observe the threshold of Dao.

As for the words "threshold" and "marvel" — in later ages, alchemists interpreted them as "the Mysterious Pass, the single threshold." They claimed that once one's cultivation penetrates this single threshold, one can become an undying Golden Immortal. But such interpretations see only a single claw or scale; they do not know the dragon's full form. Bai Juyi once said: "Laozi does not speak of medicines. He does not speak of elixirs. He does not speak of ascending to the blue sky in broad daylight."

These two words — threshold and marvel — are certainly aspects of Dao's substance and function. But everything under Heaven — states, families, body, heart, nature, destiny, every single affair and every single thing — each without exception has its own threshold and its own marvel.

Consider this analogy: the spring of a lock is the threshold. When the key meets the threshold, the lock opens. The principle by which it opens — that is the marvel. If you do not understand the

threshold and the marvel, you can break the lock apart and still not open it. But if you understand them, it is the easiest thing in the world.

Therefore, in this world of human affairs, the first thing is to understand the threshold and the marvel. Cultivate yourself without knowing them, and you will harm your own nature and destiny. Govern without knowing them, and you will ruin the state.

Scientists who build airships and steamships, flying through the skies and sailing the ocean depths — they succeed because they understand the threshold and the marvel of matter. Emperor Shun governed by nonaction and all under Heaven was ordered. Confucius served as minister for three months and the state of Lu was well governed. Both understood the threshold and the marvel of statecraft.

But while every affair and every thing has its own threshold and its own marvel, one need not seek to know them — they are known of themselves. The question is: what is the threshold and the marvel of Dao itself? At this very moment, the entire world is consumed by warfare and slaughter, in a state of utter devastation. People compete for power and seize profit with no regard for human decency. Where is the threshold that will save all under Heaven?

I, this young student, dare to cry out at the top of my voice and present to all my fellow countrymen across the world Laozi's secret for ending the slaughter. What is this marvel? It is the Dao of emptiness and nothingness. What is this threshold? It is De that cherishes life. Without these, selfish desire fills the breast and cruelty becomes habit — how could there not be warfare and slaughter?

Alas! These years of warfare and slaughter — the lives lost and ruined are no small number; the fortunes destroyed are no small sum. My fellow countrymen, my fellow countrymen — can we not awaken? Let all of us practice Laozi's Dao and De, turn back this tide of killing, and bring about the shared happiness of peace and well-being for all nations under Heaven.

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