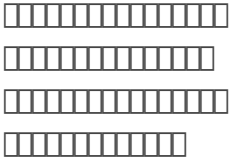


Chapter 11



Translation

Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub —
in the hollow center, the wheel finds its turning.
Shape clay to form a vessel —
in the emptiness within, the vessel finds its holding.
Cut doors and windows to frame a room —
in the open space, the room finds its dwelling.
Thus what is present gives advantage;
what is absent gives purpose.

Word Notes

- 辐 — "**spoke**": The spoke of a wheel.
- 毂 — "**hub**": The hub of a wheel, where the spokes converge.
- 揉 — "**knead**": To mix water with clay.
- 埴 — "**clay**": To shape clay into a vessel.
- 斲 — "**cut**": To chisel open.
- 牖 — "**window**": A window opening.

Chapter Explanation

Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub. It is precisely **where the hub is hollow** that the wheel can turn, and the cart can carry people and goods to useful purpose. Clay is kneaded with water and shaped into a vessel. It is precisely **where the vessel is hollow** within that it can hold water and broth to useful purpose. Doors and windows are cut to make a room. It is precisely **where the doors and windows open** that people can dwell within to useful purpose. Therefore, having physical form is what makes something advantageous. Yet it is **the emptiness within that makes it useful**.

Discourse

This chapter borrows the external to illustrate the internal, borrows the visible to illustrate the invisible. Even taking visible things on their own terms, their usefulness lies entirely in what is

invisible. Implements below the level of form are rooted in Dao above the level of form. The invisible cannot benefit without the visible; the visible cannot function without the invisible. Dao must borrow implements to become manifest; implements must be rooted in Dao for their function to be great. Thus Laozi not only illuminated the study of Dao but also deeply understood the study of implements. For the Sage who apprehends Dao looks up and looks down, and there is nothing among the principles of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad beings that he does not understand. He simply does not make his name through any single skill. Confucius, for example, was learned and multitalented, yet could not be defined by any one accomplishment. And as for the feathered followers of later ages — they may not have been the true orthodox heirs of Laozi. Nevertheless, when the furnace-and-fire school smelted lead and refined mercury, this was precisely the principle that modern scientists call analysis and synthesis. When the adepts and masters of the arts produced wondrous skills and extraordinary abilities, and manufactured implements of war and defense, this was precisely the function that modern scientists call invention and manufacture. Yet at the time they were hated by despotic rulers, who feared these arts might be turned against them, and so denounced them as heretical sorcery and enforced severe prohibitions. Thus the transmission was lost and could not progress. Yet this is enough to prove that the study of Dao is not useless. One who truly possesses the study of Dao will naturally understand the study of implements. But later generations failed to perceive this and went so far as to say that the teachings of Laozi were enough to destroy a nation and extinguish its people. They truly did not know the real face of Laozi!

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