

Chapter 14

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Translation

Look for it and it cannot be seen — call it the invisible.
Listen for it and it cannot be heard — call it the inaudible.
Reach for it and it cannot be caught — call it the intangible.
These three cannot be fathomed further;
they merge and become one.

Its rising is not bright.
Its sinking is not dark.
On and on, an unbroken thread — it cannot be named,
and returns again to nothing.

This is the shape without shape,
the image without image —
the elusive, the unfathomable.
Approach it and you cannot see its face.
Follow it and you cannot see its back.

Hold fast to the ancient Dao
to master all that the present holds.
To know the ancient beginning —
this is the guiding thread of Dao.

Word Notes

- □ — "**the invisible**": Describing what cannot be seen. JXZ: "a term for what is beyond sight and hearing."

- ☐ — **"the inaudible"**: Describing what cannot be heard.
- ☐ — **"the intangible"**: Small, subtle — that which cannot be grasped.
- ☐ — **"fathom"**: To question, to investigate to the end.
- ☐ — **"bright"**: Brilliant, luminous.
- ☐ — **"dark"**: Dim, obscure.
- ☐☐ — **"ceaselessly"**: Continuing one after another, an unbroken thread.
- ☐☐ — **"the elusive and obscure"**: Subtle and unfathomable.
- ☐ — **"thread"**: The guiding thread, the organizing principle.

Chapter Explanation

Look for it and you still cannot see it — its name is "the invisible." **Listen for it and you still cannot hear it** — its name is "the inaudible." **Grasp for it and you still cannot catch it** — its name is "the intangible." These three — formless, colorless, soundless — **cannot be fathomed through questioning**. Therefore they **merge and become one**. All things have light and dark, yet **its upper aspect is not bright** and **its lower aspect is not dark**. It flows on without cease amid the affairs of daily life, yet still **it cannot be named**. It **returns again to the realm of nothing**. This is what is called **the shape without shape, the image without image**. This is what it means to call it the elusive and obscure — one cannot say it exists, yet one cannot say it does not exist. **Approach it and you cannot see its face. Follow it and you cannot see its back**. This is Dao, which has existed since antiquity. If one **holds fast to the Dao of ancient times**, one can thereby **command and employ all that the present holds**. The ability to **know how Dao began in antiquity** — this is **the guiding thread** of the one who has attained Dao.

Discourse

Today the world's civilization — sound, light, electricity, and chemical transformation — has produced all manner of things in full profusion. Yet what exists today did not spring into being only now. It has existed since antiquity. It is simply that people today have newly discovered and brought it forth. And all that exists — where ultimately does it come from? Even if we progress for tens of thousands of years beyond the present, pushing inquiry to the point where there is nothing left to inquire into, there must remain something that cannot be seen, cannot be heard, cannot be conceived, cannot be expressed in words. This invisible, inaudible something is given the provisional name of Dao. It is the original source of all that exists. Because all that exists has form and sound, all that exists is subject to change and destruction. Dao has neither form nor sound, and therefore undergoes no change and no destruction. It is eternally new across the ages. If one grasps its guiding thread and holds fast to it, then all that exists will serve one's purposes. Laozi's two lines — **"hold fast to the ancient Dao to master all that the present holds"** — are truly the master key, the essential secret. Those in today's world who are fond of antiquity mostly cling stubbornly to the words and deeds of the ancients. They do not realize that these are merely the discarded traces of what has already passed. They are not the Dao of antiquity. The Dao of antiquity is the Dao of today. Dao knows neither ancient nor modern. If one can truly hold fast to the ancient Dao, one can command and employ all that the present holds.

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