

# Chapter 15

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*Alternate editions read:* □□□□□□ .

## Translation

The skilled practitioners of old —  
subtle and wondrous, mysteriously penetrating,  
deep beyond all reckoning.

Precisely because they were beyond reckoning,  
we can only strain to describe them:

Cautious — as the yu-beast testing a winter river.  
Watchful — as the you-beast wary of all its neighbors.  
Grave — as a guest.  
Yielding — as ice about to melt.  
Solid — as unhewn wood.  
Open — as a valley.  
Murky — as turbid water.

Who can, being turbid, through stillness grow slowly clear?  
Who can, being still, through long movement slowly come alive?

Those who preserve this Dao do not seek fullness.  
Precisely because they do not seek fullness,  
they can wear thin without needing to be made new.

## Word Notes

- ☐ — "**the yu-beast**": A beast by this name. JXZ glosses: "The yu waits until ice has frozen solid before it will cross water in winter."
- ☐ — "**the you-beast**": A beast by this name. JXZ glosses: "The you climbs into trees and only comes down when it hears no sound of people."
- ☐ — "**grave**": Reverent, solemn.
- ☐ — "**yielding**": Dispersing, loosening.
- ☐ — "**solid**": Thick, substantial.
- ☐ — "**unhewn wood**": Wood that has not yet been carved into an implement. The primal, unadorned state.
- ☐ — "**open**": Empty, expansive.
- ☐ — "**murky**": Muddled, undifferentiated.
- ☐ — "**worn**": Broken, threadbare.

## Chapter Explanation

**The skilled practitioners of old** were supremely subtle, supremely wondrous, supremely far-reaching, supremely penetrating — so profoundly deep that they could not be fathomed. **Precisely because they could not be fathomed**, we can only **strain to describe them**. They were **cautious as the yu-beast testing a winter river** — proceeding with the utmost care. They were **watchful as the you-beast descending from a tree, wary of the presence of people** — full of the deepest apprehension. **Grave as a guest** in their reverence, without the least impertinence. **Yielding as ice about to melt**, without the least rigidity. Supremely **solid, like unhewn wood** in its unadorned simplicity. Supremely **open, like a valley** that receives all things. Supremely **murky, like turbid water**, concealing all brightness. And yet though they seemed turbid, they were in truth supremely clear — they simply did not take sharp discrimination as wisdom. The worldly, with their cleverness and self-assurance, may seem clear, but they are in truth turbid. **Who can hold to turbidity rather than grasping at apparent clarity**, muddling along in honest simplicity, and wait for stillness to bring slow clarity? **Who can remain at peace for a long while**, not acting rashly, and wait for that stillness to reach its limit and slowly give rise to life? Those who **preserve this Dao do not seek fullness**. Precisely because they do not seek fullness, they can **wear thin without rashly seeking to be made new**.

## Discourse

The preceding chapter described the mystery of Dao — how it is without sound and without scent. This chapter describes the sages of antiquity who were one body with Dao — how they too were subtle and unfathomable. Yet when we strain to fathom the unfathomable, their vigilance and apprehension, their depth and breadth, their magnanimous tolerance, their humble self-restraint — these dimly reveal the first glimmers of abundant De. But such a bearing is not something one can acquire in haste. If one seeks the gateway to entering De, one must find contentment in the plain and tranquil and take no delight in the novel and exotic. One must be humble and lowly, never seeking fullness. One must shed all entanglements, quietly nourishing clarity. One must be calm and steady, waiting for the heavenly impulse to stir of itself. Then one will naturally enter the realm of Dao. Yet when Laozi asks "Who can..." — I believe it is because the people of the world are themselves rushing and scrambling, their hearts roiled by selfish desires, not a single moment free

from the turmoil of fortune's currents. And so there is, in his words, the sigh of one who finds no kindred spirit in all the world.

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Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:34:30 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:42:02 UTC by Phil