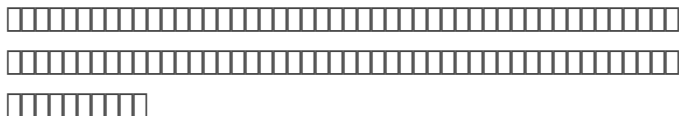


Chapter 2



Alternate editions read: 道 .

Translation

When all under Heaven know beauty as beauty,
ugliness has already arisen.

When all know goodness as goodness,
what is not good has already arisen.

Therefore:

having and not-having give birth to each other,
the difficult and the easy complete each other,
the long and the short give shape to each other,
the high and the low lean into each other,
tone and voice harmonize with each other,
before and after follow upon each other.

Thus the Sage dwells in the work of nonaction
and practices the teaching without words.

The myriad beings arise, and he does not turn them away.

He gives them life yet does not possess them.

He acts yet does not presume upon it.

His merit is achieved, yet he does not dwell in it.

It is precisely because he does not dwell in it
that it does not depart.

Word Notes

- 美 — "**beauty**": means good, fine, beautiful.
- 丑 — "**ugliness**": means not good, bad.
- 善 — "**goodness**": means good, virtuous.
- 形 — "**give shape to**": means to make visible by contrast.
- 相 — "**lean into**": means to topple, to incline — suggesting that high and low define each other by their relative positions, each leaning toward the other.
- 和 — "**harmonize**": means to blend, to adjust into accord.

- □ — "**turn away**": means to push away, to decline.
- □ — "**presume upon**": means to depend on, to presume upon one's own ability.

Chapter Explanation

When all under Heaven know that what is beautiful counts as beauty, many begin to feign beauty — and beauty ceases to be beauty. When all know that what is good counts as goodness, many begin to falsely profess goodness — and goodness ceases to be goodness. What is not good and not beautiful arises from within the good and the beautiful themselves. Therefore, **having and not-having** give birth to each other. **The difficult and the easy** complete each other. **The long and the short** give shape to each other by contrast. **The high and the low** lean into and define each other. **Tone and voice** blend with each other in harmony. **Before and after** follow one upon the other. For this reason the Sage **dwells in the work of nonaction** and **practices the teaching without words**. All the myriad beings arise, yet he does not turn them away; without seizing or choosing, he lets them follow their nature. He gives life to the myriad beings yet does not claim them as his own. He manages all affairs yet does not presume upon his ability. When great merit is achieved, he remains placid and at ease, never dwelling in it. It is precisely because he does not dwell in merit that his merit endures for ten thousand ages and cannot be taken away.

Discourse

This chapter teaches that whenever named forms arise — these are beauty, these are goodness — they are also relative opposition. Where there is beauty, there is what is not beautiful; where there is goodness, there is what is not good. And what is not beautiful and not good is still born from beauty and goodness themselves. Therefore, post-celestial things with named forms are all insufficient to serve as the substance of Dao.

Yet although they are insufficient to serve as Dao's substance, to aim for the purely pre-celestial would also be without function or use. Without the post-celestial, the pre-celestial cannot be realized. The farthest reach of the post-celestial is itself the pre-celestial. Pre-celestial and post-celestial circulate in mutual alternation. Everything under Heaven that stands in relative opposition follows this same pattern. At the juncture where prior and subsequent cycle into each other, the threshold and the marvel emerge.

The Sage has observed this threshold and this marvel. He takes the pre-celestial as his foundation and employs the post-celestial, yet he is neither stained by nor attached to the post-celestial. Therefore, dwelling in the work of nonaction, he is naturally able to govern by composing himself. Practicing the teaching without words, he naturally achieves the effect Mencius described: "Wherever he passes, transformation follows; wherever he dwells, spirit abides." Although the myriad beings spring up in profusion, he follows their innate nature so that they naturally grow together without harming one another. Moreover, he gives life to the myriad beings yet does not regard it as De; he brings them to completion yet does not regard it as merit. He is utterly unconcerned and placid, for he considers the merit of giving life and completing things to be simply Dao's naturalness. Not only does harboring the thought of presuming upon De or dwelling in merit

negate that very merit, but even having the name or concept of merit and De already falls into post-celestial traces.

Yet even though the Sage acts this way, Dao's naturalness is such that if one dwells in merit, the merit vanishes; if one does not dwell in merit, it endures for ten thousand ages. Why is this so?

Consider this analogy: suppose a person has a sum of money. If he considers it public currency circulating for the common good of the world, not his private possession, and uses it for works of public benefit, that money will endure forever. All people of all ages will surely say, "This was left by such-and-such a great figure." But if he considers it his private possession and spends it on himself, the money is instantly gone.

All affairs in the universe follow this pattern.

Later people, failing to understand Laozi's true principle, turned around and said that Laozi's purity and nonaction obstruct human progress. Little do they realize that Laozi's nonaction is not the nonaction of a clay idol or wooden puppet that does absolutely nothing. It is nonaction that leaves nothing undone. One dwells in nonaction in order to employ action — only one does not become attached to action. For if one becomes attached to action, one can only perform small deeds, never great ones; one can act in one direction but not in ten thousand; and if one acts without ceasing, one will eventually be unable to act at all.

Why is this so? Consider: Western scholars place the highest value on rest. Everyone under Heaven sleeps. Rest and sleep are nonaction. Yet through rest one can restore vital spirits to full vigor and undertake every kind of enterprise. Is this not nonaction that leaves nothing undone? But if one acts without rest, within seven days one will certainly die. Is this not action that turns into nonaction — and indeed, absolute nonaction?

Consider another analogy: the electron in the expanse of space has no particular function. That is nonaction. Yet through the processes of mixing and combining, every single thing in the universe, when traced to its original substance, has been constituted through the electron. This is nonaction that becomes great action — there is nothing it does not do. But once a particular thing has been formed, unless its temperature or pressure changes, it cannot become yet another thing. The function of that particular thing is far less than the electron's original power of combination. And if temperature and pressure do not change, action cannot lead to leaving nothing undone. Moreover, wherever there is combination there must also be decomposition. When decomposition has run its full course and nothing remains to be divided, what remains is still the electron. Action in the end is unable to act — and in the end it returns to nonaction.

Consider yet another analogy: a skilled engineer oversees a number of machines. He sits there, neither moving nor at rest, watching each machine run. This is nonaction — and it is also desireless observation of the marvel. When a machine falters, he sees whether it needs water, or fire, or oil, or some other adjustment. This is action — and it is also desiring observation of the threshold. Having observed the threshold, the machine runs again. And once the machine runs, he returns to sitting, neither moving nor at rest. (Not moving means he sits without stirring. Not at rest means that although he does not move, he oversees all the machines — he is not in a state of empty

quiescence.) This is action, yet without clinging to it — and it returns to nonaction once more.

But if one clings to action: if a single machine breaks down and one devotes all one's energy to repairing it — or, having repaired it, remains anxiously watching it for fear it will break again — then all the other machines are neglected. Those that have stopped remain stopped. Those running at the wrong speed go on running wrong. Everything falls into chaos. This is clinging to action, and thus one cannot achieve nonaction that leaves nothing undone.

One can see that nonaction is supremely numinous and supremely wondrous. It is the substance and the mother of action. When people of the world say that Laozi's nonaction is useless and obstructs progress, they not only fail to understand Laozi and fail to understand nonaction — they do not even understand the principle of progress itself.

The progress of the study of implements moves from the pre-celestial into the post-celestial. This is the progress of action. When it progresses to its extreme and the material atoms are entirely expended, all people and things on the earth will be destroyed. Though it is called progress, in truth it is decline. This is not to say that the progress of the study of implements is bad — this kind of progress is also Dao's naturalness. Without it, there would be no world. I said in this chapter's discourse that if everything were purely pre-celestial, there would be no function or use — and this honors that kind of progress. However, because people of the world do not understand the underlying principle of progress and cling to a one-sided view, they recklessly disparage the ancients. Therefore I cannot help but argue from the root.

Let the reader examine this carefully, and not let my words obscure my meaning.

What Laozi teaches — dwelling in nonaction to employ action, achieving merit without dwelling in it, gathering action back into nonaction — this is the progress of the study of Dao. This is true progress.

In truth, what Laozi speaks of is also decline. For if Dao did not decline, the world itself could not exist, and there would be no way to articulate principles and teach them to people. Therefore, every dao that can be spoken or seen is a dao of decline. Decline carried to its extreme becomes progress; progress carried to its extreme becomes decline. Progress and decline cycle in alternation. In truth there is no such thing as progress, and no such thing as decline. It is merely that, comparing the study of Dao with the study of implements, one provisionally assigns names and calls the study of implements decline and the study of Dao progress. But the progress and decline of the study of Dao and the study of implements are themselves in mutual circulation.

After Laozi transmitted the five thousand words, Guan Yin, Zhuangzi, and Liezi developed many of his ideas. Though this may be called progress, it was all entrusted to empty words, laying the groundwork for what was to come, without producing visible results. When the Han dynasty arrived, right after the warfare and chaos of the Warring States, Cao Shen merely applied a portion of Laozi's Dao — and all under Heaven became pure and tranquil. Emperor Wen carried on his intent, and the realm was nearly free of punishments to impose — it had the flavor of the reigns of King Cheng and King Kang. Everyone esteemed the teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. This was the time when a portion of Laozi's Dao had progressed to its apex.

But when progress reaches its apex, decline must follow. As the study of Dao declined, the study of implements progressed. Europe's new learning had its origins in the Han era. And Laozi's study of Dao was transformed: first into Wei Boyang's alchemy, then into Kou Qianzhi's talismanic rites, and further into the heterodox theories of prayer, sacrifice, and occult practitioners, as well as the empty talk, vanity, and unbridled libertinism of the Jin-era literati. Things were in utter chaos.

And so Han Yu denounced all this as heterodoxy. The Song Confucians, failing to examine the matter, followed suit — and declared that the learning of Laozi was more poisonous than Yang Zhu and Mo Di.

By the present day, the study of implements among the Western nations has progressed to its apex. In military power, their green-smoke airships and lethal efficiency surpass ours ten-thousandfold. In national wealth, their ingenious manufactures and flourishing industry surpass ours ten-thousandfold. Our nation long ago lost its effective and true study of Dao, and we do not understand the study of implements either. How could we fail to be exposed by comparison, impoverished and enfeebled to the very brink of national ruin?

And so the zealous progressives, inflamed with the fervor of national salvation, without distinguishing right from wrong, heaped the entire blame for poverty and weakness onto Laozi. One voice was taken up by a hundred; the whole nation went mad. No one did not regard the learning of Laozi as poison. The study of Dao had truly declined to its nadir.

But when decline reaches its nadir, it must turn to progress. From this point forward, Laozi's true study of Dao will progress, and the Western study of implements will decline. Decline here is meant in the living sense — not extinction, but the ceasing of esteem. The study of implements will also advance alongside Dao's progress. The study of implements is a part of the study of Dao.

In former times, a mere portion of Laozi's Dao was sufficient to save our nation from warfare and slaughter. In the present day, the full measure of Laozi's great Dao will surely be sufficient to save the entire world from warfare and slaughter. This threshold, this marvel — I, this young student, have observed and discerned them over the course of several years.

I humbly wish that all people under Heaven would discuss Dao and deliberate on De, and progress together with the great Dao. If they only know how to worship competition, they will decline together with the study of implements.

Western scholars have illuminated the study of implements, enabling all people under Heaven to share the happiness of material civilization. I humbly wish to join with those who love Dao and illuminate the study of Dao, enabling all people under Heaven to share the happiness of Dao-civilization.

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