Chapter 20

[illegible]

Translation

Abandon learning — be free of worry.
Between assent and rebuke,
how great is the distance?
Between good and evil,
what is the difference?
What others fear,
I too must not dismiss.
Vast and boundless — it stretches on without end!

The multitude are merry and bright,
as though feasting at a grand banquet,
as though ascending the terrace in spring.
I alone am still, giving no sign —
like an infant who has not yet learned to smile.
Adrift, unhurried, as though with nowhere to return.

The multitude all have more than enough;
I alone seem to have lost everything.
Mine is the heart of a fool —
muddled and dim.
The common people shine with knowing;
I alone seem lost in shadow.
The common people are sharp and sure;
I alone am dull and withdrawn.
Faint, as though dissolved in darkness;
desolate, as though with nowhere to rest.

The multitude all have their purpose;
I alone am stubborn and rough-hewn.
I alone differ from others —
and prize being nourished at the Source.

Word Notes

- □ **— "assent"**: A direct, straightforward response.
- □ **— "rebuke"**: A crooked, evasive response.
- □ **— "vast"**: Great, immense.
- □□ **— "merry and gay"**: In a state of cheerful ease and delight.
- □ **— "still"**: Tranquil, without attachment.
- □□ **— "drifting"**: In motion, moving about.
- □□ **— "muddled"**: Undifferentiated and unaware.
- □□ **— "bright and knowing"**: Luminously clear.
- □□ **— "dull and confused"**: Dim and unknowing.
- □ **— "darkness"**: Not bright, obscured.
- □ **— "desolate"**: Empty and still.
- □ **— "stubborn"**: Foolish, intractable.
- □ **— "uncouth"**: Crude, unrefined.
- □ **— "nourished"**: To feed, to sustain.

Chapter Explanation

Having **abandoned the learning** of worldly names and forms, one is **free of the worry** born of discrimination and calculation. Between the direct and the crooked, **how great is the distance?** Between good and evil, **what is the difference?** One simply listens and lets it pass. **What others fear**, I too cannot fail to fear. Yet I have transcended the cycles of Heaven and Earth — **vast and boundless, without end or boundary** — so what is there to fear?

The multitude are merry and gay, greedy for the pleasures of desire, **as though feasting at a great banquet, as though ascending the terrace** to enjoy fine music in spring. **I alone am tranquil**, showing no stirring of desire — **like an infant who has not yet learned to smile**, lively and free, moving as Heaven moves, without the slightest taint. **The multitude all have** self-satisfied hearts. **I alone seem to have lost everything** — empty and hollow through and through. **Mine is the heart of a fool** — muddled and murky! **The common people** draw excessively on their **brightness**; **I alone seem benighted**, knowing nothing. **The common people** are excessively sharp and **discerning**; **I alone am dull and confused**, making no distinctions. **Dim**, as though unknowing, **shrouded in darkness**. **Desolate**, as though with **nowhere to rest**. **The multitude all have** something to rely upon. **I alone am stubborn and uncouth**, as though without ability. In everything, **I alone differ from others** — yet I prize returning to the source, **nourishing myself with the pre-celestial**.

Discourse

Confucius opens his mouth and speaks of learning. From learning comes delight, then joy, then the equanimity of not taking offense. Laozi, on the other hand, says "abandon learning — be free of worry." Being free of worry and not taking offense amount to the same thing. Learning and not-learning, however, stand in utter opposition. Yet people do not realize that Confucius taught from the standpoint of the human Dao, and therefore taught the path of learning from below to reach above. Laozi spoke from the standpoint of Heaven's Dao, and therefore needed no learning at all.

Moreover, what Laozi would have people abandon is not the learning Confucius spoke of. It is the learning of those worldly scholars who cling obsessively to names, forms, and appearances, who sort things into categories of good and evil, straight and crooked, until they fall into attachment to words and attachment to principles and phenomena — laboring in worry their whole lives without ever seeing Dao clearly. This is why he shatters it with one stroke: "Abandon learning — be free of worry."

Yet there are those who, while not falling into attachment to words or attachment to principles and phenomena, shrink from difficulty and settle for comfort. They look upon cultivation of Dao as climbing to Heaven. They cling to life and fear death, fear poverty and fear lowliness. Or they are entangled in desire, craving fine flavors and chasing sensory pleasures. Or they are self-satisfied and full of themselves, unable to receive with an empty heart. Or they exhaust their cleverness, or scrutinize petty affairs, or rely on wealth and status, or pride themselves on talent and ability. All of these are enough to obstruct Dao. One must shatter every last one and return to the state before birth — unknowing, unaware, in the muddled and dim primordial Heaven. Only then can one see one's original face. With the pre-celestial emptiness as nourishment, there is a nameless and indescribable true joy, compared to which the pleasures of grand banquets and spring terraces are inferior by ten thousand upon ten thousand times.

In the school of Confucius, only Yan Hui shed his cleverness and cast aside his cunning, appearing foolish all day long, with precisely this kind of bearing. That is why he could remain unchanged in his joy.

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