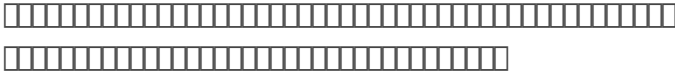


# Chapter 32



## Translation

Dao has no fixed name.  
The unhewn wood, though small,  
none under Heaven dare treat it as a subject.  
If lords and kings could hold to it,  
the myriad beings would come as guests of their own accord.  
Heaven and Earth would join together  
and send down sweet dew —  
no one commands it, yet it falls in perfect balance.

When the first institutions were made, names arose with them.  
Once names exist,  
one must know where to stop.  
Knowing where to stop —  
this is how one forestalls the beginning of danger.

Dao's presence throughout all under Heaven  
is like streams and valleys flowing to the river and the sea.

## Word Notes

- 露 — "**dew**": Here specifically "sweet dew" (甘露), an auspicious omen signifying cosmic harmony.
- 均 — "**balanced**": Even, equally distributed.

## Chapter Explanation

**Dao** is truly constant and unchanging, yet it has no name. Having no name is precisely what makes it noble. Like the **unhewn wood** that has not yet been fashioned into implements and thus has no name — though one might call it small, no one under Heaven dares treat it as a subordinate. If lords and kings could hold fast to this whole and undivided unhewn wood, they could govern through nonaction, and **the myriad beings would each naturally find their proper place** — harmonious, joyful, and reverently at ease. When such harmony calls forth a response, **Heaven and Earth find their proper positions** and yin and yang join together, sending down auspicious sweet dew. This sweet dew moistens all things everywhere — no one apportions it, yet it

distributes itself in perfect, even balance.

But in the beginning, when the world had not yet reached the Great Accord, named institutions had inevitably to be established to govern all under Heaven. Once these named institutions exist and can sustain the world, one should **know where to stop** — one must not cling to names and forms. **Knowing where to stop** ensures that the unhewn wood is not exhausted, that the root source is not lost, and that one is therefore never in danger. One can then return to the root and restore the source, flowing on without ceasing. It is like Dao nurturing all things under Heaven with no discernible beginning — like rivers, streams, and mountain springs paying homage to the sea in an unending flow.

## Discourse

This chapter and the *Liyun* chapter of the *Book of Rites* are outer and inner expressions of the same truth. The *Liyun* opens by speaking of the Great Unity; here Laozi says **"the myriad beings would come as guests of their own accord."** When all people under Heaven treat one another as honored guests — harmonious, warm, and intimate — with no barriers of ruler and subject, high and low, no distinctions of "this territory" and "that boundary," and moreover when they love the people and cherish all beings so that "all things flourish together without harming one another" and one can peer into the nests of birds and the burrows of beasts — is this not the very picture of the Great Unity?

The *Liyun* speaks of being free from the calamities of flood, drought, and pestilence, and of the appearance of auspicious signs of every kind. This is precisely what this chapter means by **"Heaven and Earth join together and send down sweet dew"** — the confirming evidence of the Great Unity. The only difference is one of detail.

In the *Liyun*, after "scheming and contrivance arose, and warfare began from this," Yu, Tang, Kings Wen and Wu, and the Duke of Zhou brought forth the various categories of ritual, music, humaneness, and righteousness to give order to all under Heaven. In the end it returns to the Great Accord. In the state of the Great Accord, people do not indulge their emotions; being without emotions means that joy, anger, sorrow, and delight have not yet arisen. At this point there are no names that can be named — the named returns to the nameless. Without name, without form, following what is natural of itself — this is Accord. Accord is the station of the Sage. Confucius's "following one's heart's desire without overstepping the bounds" is exactly this Accord. Mencius said, "Joy, and then it lives. Once it lives, how can it be stopped? And when it cannot be stopped, one does not even know that the hands begin to dance and the feet begin to tap." This is the very picture of Accord. This Great Accord is the Great Unity carried to its ultimate point of evolution — following one's Heavenly nature, not knowing what is same or different. Not only is the thought of difference absent, but even the thought of sameness is unknown.

This chapter, coming after "fine weapons being instruments of ill omen," speaks of **"when the first institutions were made, names arose with them."** This too is because in an age of warfare, the nameless Great Dao cannot suddenly be applied to governance. One must first establish the named institutions of government and moral teaching. Yet Laozi does not specify

what these names are, for Laozi's Dao sets up no names or forms. Moreover, when Confucius came to inquire about the rites, Laozi had already conveyed to him everything about names. Afterward, Confucius edited the *Songs* and *Documents*, codified the rites and music, compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and composed the *Classic of Filial Piety* — defining the distinctions of names in meticulous detail. Still fearing that people would not understand, Confucius seized upon Zilu's question about governing the state of Wei to declare plainly: "What is needed first is surely the rectification of names!" Wei was a poor and weak state, one where father and son defied each other and stirred up chaos. Confucius's meaning was this: in an age of disorder, the rectification of names is indispensable. Only in an age of great peace can one remove the names that bind people.

People today do not observe the conditions of the times. They rashly seek to overthrow the named distinctions of human relationships — this is to lead all people under Heaven into the ways of beasts. Truly a great delusion beyond comprehension!

Confucius had already set the distinctions of names in good order. Confucius was the "sage for this season" — he was by no means one who clung rigidly to names. If one savors the Classics carefully, one will understand this for oneself. There is no leisure here to discuss it further.

Therefore Laozi had no need to establish names again, nor to compete with Confucius for the saintly title of "teacher for ten thousand generations." Laozi's denigration of humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, his smashing of every name and form — all of this served as Confucius's rearguard. Readers should understand this.

Yet Laozi also feared that later generations would misunderstand, would disregard the conditions of the times and human sentiments, and would loftily preach nonaction — leading to the calamity of empty talk that ruins the state. And so he could not but say that "in the beginning there must be names." But he does not say what those names are, leaving room for Confucius. Laozi's way of framing his words reaches the height of subtlety — and the height of difficulty.

He then says that once names are established, one must stop — one must not cling to names, but cause the named to return to the nameless, back to the naturalness of Heaven. Then everyone follows their Heavenly nature in what they do — following to the point where there is nothing left to follow. Like Dao giving life to beings, flowing without obstruction. Like water returning to the sea, vital and never stagnant. This truly arrives at the realm where nothing can be named. Is this not the very mirror-image of the *Liyun*?

This is why I annotated the *Liyun* first and the *Dao De Jing* afterward — proceeding from the named to the nameless. The *Liyun* is not solely about names; the *Dao De Jing* is not solely about the nameless. To say that one proceeds from the named to the nameless is to speak in terms of the predominant character of each.

---

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:35:46 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:42:38 UTC by Phil