

Chapter 33



Translation

To know others is cleverness;
to know oneself is illumination.
To overcome others takes force;
to overcome oneself is true strength.
To know contentment is wealth;
to act with perseverance is resolve.
Not to lose one's ground is to endure;
to die yet not perish is true longevity.

Word Notes

- 亡 — "**perish**": To be extinguished, to vanish completely.
- 寿 — "**longevity**": Living to a great age; here extended to mean life beyond physical death.

Chapter Explanation

One who discerns right and wrong in others is called clever. One who perceives one's own gains and losses is called illumined. One who can prevail over others is said to have force. One who can prevail over one's own passions and desires is truly strong. One who knows contentment and does not covet is truly wealthy. One who strenuously practices Dao is a person of resolve. One who does not lose the ground on which one stands can endure long. One whose body dies yet whose spirit does not perish has true longevity.

Discourse

The general import of the preceding chapters has often included arguments against using cleverness, against using strength, and against pursuing wealth. Reading them, one feels rather ill at ease. If people go about in a fog, feeble and without any backbone — can this really work? And though wealth may not be something one can demand, surely one cannot be entirely without an occupation, living off the charity of others. No wonder the study of Laozi has been reviled by the world!

It is only upon reaching this chapter that one grasps Laozi's true intent. He teaches us not to direct these qualities outward but to direct them inward. This is precisely what Confucius and Mencius meant by "turning inward and examining oneself."

Otherwise — if one only seeks externally and pays no heed to what lies within — even one who knows others as shrewdly as Chao Cuo, who was hailed as "the Bag of Wisdom," still provoked the Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms and could not escape execution. Even one as mighty as the Hegemon-King could not, for all his raging, bring peace to all under Heaven, and died at the Wu River. Even one as rich as Deng Tong could not escape starvation. But beyond the killing of the body and the ruin of the name — these are still small matters. When one seeks only from without, one is buffeted about by external things, and the original heart is let loose and does not return. To lose the original heart — this is what truly deserves our grief.

One must turn the light of observation inward, gather back the heart that has been let loose, examine one's own gains and losses, and cause the principle of Heaven to prevail over human desire. Then one accepts one's lot and finds joy in Dao. What is not rightfully mine — not a hair of it dare I take. Only then does the heart come to rest upon the "peaceful dwelling." Towering and immovable — wealth and rank, poverty and lowliness, might and arms — all seem as if they were nothing at all. The body may be killed, but the will cannot be seized. The body may die, but the spirit is never extinguished.

Stated in terms of what is hidden: this is like King Wen ascending and descending, at God's left and right. Stated in terms of what is manifest: this is like Confucius receiving the sacrificial offerings of a thousand autumns, honored and beloved by all under Heaven. This is truly to endure without decay, to enjoy longevity without limit.

Ha — if a person can embody this and put it into practice, does the study of Laozi really lead people astray?

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