

# Chapter 36



## Translation

What is about to be contracted  
must first be stretched open.

What is about to be weakened  
must first be strengthened.

What is about to be cast aside  
must first be raised up.

What is about to be seized  
must first be given.

This is called subtle clarity.

The soft overcomes the hard;  
the weak overcomes the strong.

A fish must not leave the deep —  
a state's sharp instruments must not be shown to others.

## Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**contracted**": Drawn together, compressed, diminished.
- 𠄎 — "**stretched open**": Spread out, extended, expanded.
- 𠄎 — "**leave**": To slip away from, to separate from.

## Chapter Explanation

What is about to be contracted must have already been stretched open. What is about to be weakened must have already been made strong. What is about to be cast aside must have already been raised to prosperity. What is about to be seized must have already been given. This is called a principle of the utmost subtlety yet also the utmost clarity. Therefore the soft can overcome the hard, and the weak can overcome the strong — all of this follows from the naturalness of Dao. Dao cannot be departed from, just as **a fish must not leave the deep water** — the moment it leaves, it dies. The state's **sharp instruments** must not be displayed boastfully to others. To strive for supremacy is to lose Dao.

# Discourse

At the extreme of triumph comes inevitable decline. At the extreme of yang comes inevitable yin. This is the universal law of waxing and waning, fullness and emptiness, revolving in cycles throughout the cosmos. From something as large as a state under Heaven down to a single affair or a single thing — nothing escapes it. The moment of supreme strength is precisely the starting point of supreme weakness. Laozi calls this "**subtle clarity**." This principle is truly of the utmost subtlety and yet of the utmost obviousness. It is exactly what the *Doctrine of the Mean* means by: "Nothing is more visible than what is hidden; nothing is more manifest than what is subtle."

Only the Sage knows where the wind begins, knows that the distant is near, knows that the subtle is the manifest. The stronger one grows, the more one abides in lowliness and yielding. Since one does not position oneself in strength, there is nothing to weaken. Not only is there nothing to weaken, but one transcends entirely the realm of opposites — strong and weak, flourishing and ruined — and stands upon ground that is unchanging through ten thousand ages. This is to return to the substance of Dao.

But since people have never seen the substance of Dao, they will surely not believe it. Let us take the analogy Laozi offers and develop it carefully, so that all people under Heaven may see it together and know it together.

Dao's giving life to human beings is like water's giving life to fish — unborn and undying, mysterious and unfathomable: this is the substance of Dao. Born and dying, changing and inconstant: this is the function of Dao. Without motion and without rest, deep in an abyss that cannot be fathomed: this is the source of water. With motion and with rest, shallow and easily known: this is the current of water.

Human beings cannot depart from the substance of Dao; fish cannot leave the deep abyss. When a person departs from the substance of Dao, that person is trapped by the decrees of fortune. When a fish leaves the deep abyss, it is caught by the fisherman. When the fish floats to the surface, it no doubt relies on the convenience of its fins — it can swim up and down, it can catch small insects — and shows this boastfully to others. And yet, as the saying goes: "Careless storage invites theft; seductive adornment invites licentiousness." No wonder it falls into the fisherman's net.

Alas — within Laozi's words of warning lies a hidden compassion. May all people under Heaven embody this together.

There are those in the world who say this chapter teaches scheming and intrigue. Truly, "the humane see humaneness, the wise see wisdom."

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