

Chapter 37



Translation

Dao abides in constant nonaction,
yet nothing is left undone.
If lords and kings could hold to this,
the myriad beings would transform of themselves.
Transformed, should desire stir,
I would still it with the nameless unhewn wood.
The nameless unhewn wood —
even this shall be free of desire.
Free of desire, resting in stillness:
all under Heaven will settle into rightness of itself.

Word Notes

- 静 — "**still**": To settle, to calm, to stabilize; here used as a verb meaning to bring to composure.

Chapter Explanation

The Great Dao abides in constant nonaction, yet from nothing it brings forth something — there is nothing it does not accomplish. If lords and kings could hold to this Dao, the myriad beings would naturally transform of their own accord. After they have naturally transformed, should any urge toward purposeful action arise, I would **still it with the nameless unhewn wood**. Even the nameless unhewn wood itself should be free of any desire to be used. Free of desire even for the unhewn wood, one rests in stillness. This is holding to Dao carried to its ultimate point. **All under Heaven will then settle into rightness of itself.**

Discourse

The vital current of the entire scripture flows continuously; the meaning runs through as a whole. Truly it is a seamless unity — the whole is one chapter, and the eighty-one chapters are one chapter. Yet the meaning of this particular chapter answers to the tone of Chapter 1. Previous scholars were not without reason in dividing the text into two volumes and individual chapters.

The "nameless unhewn wood" of this chapter is the "name that cannot be named" of Chapter 1. "Even the nameless unhewn wood shall be free of desire" is a return to "the Dao that cannot be spoken" of Chapter 1. "Nonaction, yet nothing is left undone" is precisely Chapter 1's "the beginning of Heaven and Earth," "the mother of the myriad beings," and "the gate of all marvels." Chapter 1 opens by speaking of the constant Dao and closes with "mysterious upon mysterious." This chapter opens with "Dao abides in constant nonaction" and closes with "the nameless unhewn wood — even this shall be free of desire." "Nameless" is the mysterious. "Even the nameless unhewn wood shall be free of desire" is the mysterious upon the mysterious.

Chapter 1 moves from the nameless to the named, and from the named back to the nameless. This chapter does the same. The only difference is that Chapter 1 speaks of Dao's substance and function in the abstract, encompassing everything, while this chapter speaks of Dao's substance and function as applied specifically to bringing peace to all under Heaven — slightly more concrete than Chapter 1. Because the preceding chapters have laid bare the origins and consequences of warfare under Heaven in order to cut off the source of disorder, this chapter sets forth the Great Dao for governing all under Heaven as the final destination, bringing disorder back to rectitude and serving as the summation.

Moreover, it ties off the Upper Volume and answers back to Chapter 1 — achieving both purposes with a single stroke. This is why the arrangement cannot be otherwise.

From antiquity, all disorder under Heaven has arisen from the use of implements. In ancient times, Yao and Shun governed through nonaction and employed no implements at all. By the time of the Three Dynasties, the desires of the people had gradually awakened and customs had gradually declined. Moreover, Tang and King Wu faced the chaos of Jie and Zhou. And so they had no choice but to take the nameless unhewn wood that Yao and Shun had used to bring stability to all under Heaven and fashion it into a divine implement to quell the disorder. After using it once, they wished to return to the unhewn wood. But the people had not yet reached that level, and they dared not stop using it to sustain order. Yet they set down their original intention, each composing it as a *Book of Changes*, to await later generations.

Consider: the Xia dynasty's *Changes* was called *Lianshan*, "Linked Mountains." Above and below, all was mountain. Gen is mountain. The Xia *Changes* held to Gen — stopping, and stopping again. Gen means to stop. This is the meaning of ceasing to use the implement.

The Shang dynasty's *Changes* was called *Guicang*, "Returning to Storage." This means storing it away and not using it.

The Zhou dynasty's *Changes* did not take a new name but was simply called the *Zhou Changes* — meaning revolving back to the beginning, returning to the source.

Taking the three *Changes* together, the trajectory is: from stopping, to storing away, to returning to the root. What a pity that the descendants of the Three Dynasties' sage-kings produced no sage to carry on their work. Not only could they not stop using the divine implement, they used it without cease until it was worn out.

By the Spring and Autumn period, Guan Zhong saw that the divine implement was broken. Unable to repair it, and not even knowing how it was meant to be used, he dismantled it and refashioned it into sharp implements. The Five Hegemons used them to convene the feudal lords.

By the Warring States, even the sharp implements were broken. Shang Yang saw that the sharp implements were ruined and conceived a cruel heart: he fashioned lethal implements. During the Spring and Autumn period, Confucius wrote out the methods for repairing the divine implement, for using it, and for not using it. During the Warring States period, too, Confucius's teachings continued to circulate. What a pity that the world did not heed him.

Once the lethal implements appeared, the carnage of warfare became horrific beyond description. From that time forward, some used lethal implements, some used sharp implements, but none used the divine implement. As for governing without any implements at all — that had vanished entirely.

When it came to the West, not only were sharp and lethal implements used, but implements of even greater sharpness and lethality were devised. Only the American president Washington, after using sharp implements in a bloody war, stored them away and did not use them again. He can truly stand shoulder to shoulder with our nation's Yao and Shun. Beyond him, most used lethal implements to slaughter people — and Napoleon and the present-day Kaiser of Germany are the worst among them. The present-day Kaiser is worse still. Of all the lethal implements in the entire world, none are more lethal than Germany's — and none have suffered consequences more devastating than Germany's.

Can implements still be relied upon?

Alas! The catastrophic consequences of using implements have today reached their utmost extreme. Yet this catastrophe was one that Laozi foresaw long ago. Unable to bear sitting idly by, he warned posterity in advance, saying: **"The divine implement of all under Heaven cannot be acted upon." "The state's sharp implements must not be displayed to others." "Fine weapons are instruments of ill omen."** And he pointed the way for posterity, saying: **"Still it with the nameless unhewn wood. The nameless unhewn wood — even this shall be free of desire. Free of desire, resting in stillness: all under Heaven will settle into rightness of itself."**

Seen in this light, are not Laozi's words the perfect remedy for today's disease? Are they not the true path of evolution for the age to come?

I humbly wish that everyone would study them carefully.

Volume Two (Chapters 38–81)

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