

know whose child it is, or where it comes from; it appears to precede even the Lord on High.

Discourse

This chapter speaks of the Sage who has "emptied the heart, filled the belly, softened the will, and strengthened the bones" — one who has attained Dao in his own person. He takes emptiness and nothingness as his substance, and harmony as his function. The character for "harmony" here is composed of "center" and "water," meaning "what flows from the center." What flows from the center is harmony; thus "Dao in its harmony" means centrality and harmony.

The breath of Supreme Harmony fills all of Heaven and Earth. It can give Heaven and Earth their proper place and nourish the myriad beings. Its aspect is vast and boundless, beyond description. And yet such a person does not presume upon his De, does not claim credit for his accomplishments. Gentle and supremely harmonious, he is just like an infant — serene and without desire. He tempers his own radiance — this is what Mencius calls "a sage who is great and transforming." It is the realm of "a spirit who is sagely and unfathomable." He freely mingles with the dust of the common world. This is not merely keeping oneself safe through wisdom; it is not merely avoiding startling or shocking the world. In truth, it is teaching by personal example, leading others to ever deeper understanding.

In the "Human World" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Qu Boyu teaches Yan He how to serve as tutor to the Crown Prince of Wei: "In outward form, nothing is better than to go along with him; in your heart, nothing is better than to be at harmony with him." This passage is precisely the footnote to "tempering one's light, mingling with the dust." When Guanyin manifests in all manner of bodily forms to teach the Dharma, the meaning is the same.

Most commentators interpret this as keeping oneself safe through wisdom. That is certainly correct, but it is only a one-sided explanation. Would the Sage merely preserve his own person?

Profoundly clear and still, beyond all scrutiny — his person seems to be above the world; his spirit truly transcends Heaven and Earth. And so the text says one does not know whose child he is, or where he comes from — it seems he precedes even the Lord on High. This is plainly Laozi recounting his own life story, speaking of his own virtue, painting his own portrait — displaying the living image of the man called "like a dragon" for all to see. And yet the text says "perhaps" and "seems" and "as if" — still soaring or leaping, now visible now hidden, now revealing a single scale, now revealing a single claw, keeping people from fathoming him.

The Daoist scriptures say Laozi preached the Dharma for twelve thousand days and manifested in transformation eighty-one times. Though I, this young student, understand the reasons behind this, the matter borders on the miraculous. In the secular world there is insufficient evidence to cite as proof, so I dare not insist on the point. Even if we discuss only the Laozi who served as Keeper of the Archives, some say he was a man of the Shang dynasty, others that he was a man of the Zhou dynasty. He served as a court archivist for many years yet left no notable memorial or proposal, as if he were an ordinary, unremarkable person. And yet Confucius — the greatest sage since the beginning of human history — looked up to him as a teacher and called him "like a dragon." After Laozi departed through the Hangu Pass, no one knew where he went. Is this not the very mystery

of a spirit whose transformations are beyond reckoning?

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