

Chapter 40



Translation

Reversal is how Dao moves;
yielding is how Dao works.
All things under Heaven are born from being;
being is born from nonbeing.

Word Notes

- 反 — "**reversal**": Going to the opposite; turning back. Contains both "return to the root" and "things reverse when they reach the extreme."

Chapter Explanation

What runs contrary to Dao is precisely the impulse that sets Dao in motion. What is yielding and uncontenting is precisely the way Dao functions. All things under Heaven are born from being. Being and nonbeing are opposites — yet being itself is born from nonbeing.

Discourse

Reading this chapter, I cannot help but dance for joy, crying out in wild elation: "Now at last it shall be well! The great Dao shall prevail from this day forward! All under Heaven shall have peace at last!"

How can I say this? For these several decades, the hearts of the people under Heaven, and the discourse of society at large, have been running almost entirely contrary to Dao. But the more they run contrary to Dao, the greater the movement of Dao. When yin reaches its extreme, yang is born; when chaos reaches its extreme, order follows. This is the universal law of the cosmos, in which all things revolve in mutual cycles. It is like the eleventh month, when the cold reaches its bitterest extreme — the very opposite of warmth. Yet at precisely that moment a single yang returns, and gradually spring comes back. The warm, harmonious breath of yang begins to stir from this moment of greatest opposition. The seasons of Heaven work this way, and the affairs of humankind work this way too.

Mencius said: "When Heaven is about to confer a great charge upon a person, it first makes bitter his heart and will, wearies his sinews and bones, starves his body and flesh, impoverishes his

person, and confounds his every undertaking." This is precisely the going contrary spoken of here. And it is precisely because things go contrary that a person's heart is stirred, his forbearance strengthened, and he gains abilities he never had before. Were there no opposition, no rival states and external threats, the state itself would perish.

Seeing this, all who champion Dao and De and seek to set all under Heaven right: when you encounter resistance, you must not only refrain from vexation — you should rejoice! You must not only refrain from slackening and retreat — you should advance with vigor! Yet even as you advance with vigor, you must truly dwell in yielding and lowliness, contending with no one. Seek within, not without. Seek in nonbeing, not in being. Where there is inner reality, the outer follows. Where there is nonbeing, being arises from it. Naturally, without seeking, it is attained; without acting, it is accomplished. The great Dao can naturally prevail, and all under Heaven can naturally have peace.

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:36:13 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:42:56 UTC by Phil