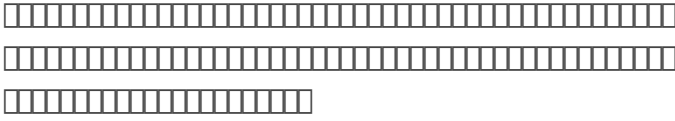


Chapter 41



Translation

The high scholar hears of Dao and at once lives it.
The middle scholar hears of Dao and half holds on, half lets go.
The low scholar hears of Dao and laughs out loud —
if it were not laughed at, it would not be worthy of Dao.

So the ancient masters had a saying:

The bright Dao seems dark;
the forward Dao seems to fall back;
the smooth Dao seems rough.

The highest De seems like a hollow valley;
great purity seems stained;
vast De seems never quite enough;
steadfast De seems easy, almost lazy;
what is true and straight seems to shift and bend.

The greatest square has no corners;
the greatest vessel takes longest to complete;
the greatest music has the most silence in it;
the greatest form has no shape at all.

Dao hides itself, without a name —
yet Dao alone is good at lending to all things
and bringing each one to completion.

Word Notes

- 忘 — "**forgotten**": To be lost, to vanish.
- 立 — "**established**": To set up, to found. "Established sayings" means ancient maxims.
- 懈 — "**lax**": Idle, negligent, perfunctory. Not "stealing" but the classical sense of appearing indolent or easygoing.
- 易 — "**changeable**": To alter, to shift.

- □ — "**corner**": An angle, an edge.
- □ — "**lending**": To lend, to loan. Dao lends its qi to the myriad beings; when their life is complete, the qi returns to Dao.

Chapter Explanation

The upper scholar hears of Dao and immediately puts it into practice. The middle scholar hears of Dao and sometimes practices it, sometimes does not. The lower scholar hears of Dao and bursts out laughing. If the lower scholar did not laugh, it would not be sufficient to count as Dao.

Those who established teachings in ancient times spoke of this: the one bright in Dao is inwardly lucid, but outwardly simple and unpolished, appearing dim. The one who advances in Dao is inwardly vigorous, but outwardly contends with no one, appearing to retreat. The most marvelous Dao, unseen to the eye, outwardly blends its light and mingles with the dust, appearing no different from ordinary people. One who possesses upper De is humble and self-abasing, like an empty valley receiving all things. One of great whiteness still emerges from the mud, appearing soiled. One of broad De does not consider himself possessed of De, appearing insufficient. One who can build De is quiescent and practices nonaction, appearing idle and negligent. One who is solid in truth follows his nature without clinging, appearing changeable and inconstant. The greatest square is square within but does not put on airs — it has no sharp edges. The greatest vessel is not made in haste, and so is completed last. The greatest music is like the sounds of nature, rare and sparse. The greatest image is like the Ultimateless, without visible form. True Dao is most hidden, without name or appearance.

Therefore the lower scholar, not knowing, laughs. Yet even though he laughs, only Dao is good at lending its qi to the myriad beings and bringing them to completion. The myriad beings are born by borrowing Dao's qi, and when their lives are complete, they return the qi to Dao.

Discourse

Ordinary people despise what is plain and common and marvel at what is strange and miraculous. But all that is strange and miraculous amounts to no more than technique. It cannot govern a state or bring peace to all under Heaven. Only the great Dao is utterly even and utterly ordinary, unchanged through all the ages. Though even and ordinary, it never sinks to the level of the vulgar. Therefore it is difficult to win people's belief, and harder still to move them to practice it.

Among Confucius's disciples, only Yan Hui diligently practiced it, "for three months never departing from humaneness." The rest were in the state of "sometimes keeping it, sometimes losing it — reaching it now and then for a day or a month, and no more." Beyond them, the people of the world either laughed at Confucius as pedantic or laughed at him as old-fashioned. Those with a smattering of understanding laughed at Confucius for not guarding his own reputation or for not reading the times. Because Confucius harbored profound depths within, those who never found the gate could not enter. They never saw the splendor and abundance of the ancestral halls and the hundred offices, and so they mocked.

Yet one who truly possesses Dao follows his nature and acts, heedless of whether others laugh or not. When Dao prevails, Heaven and Earth settle into their proper places and the myriad beings flourish, and all people under Heaven receive its blessings without even knowing it. Whether others laugh or do not laugh — what does it matter?

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