

Chapter 48



Translation

In the pursuit of learning, one gains day by day.
In the pursuit of Dao, one sheds day by day.
Shedding and shedding again,
until nothing remains to be done.
Through nothing remaining to be done, nothing is left undone.
Therefore one who would win all under Heaven
does so always through effortless engagement.
When one resorts to contrivance,
it is not enough to win all under Heaven.

Word Notes

- See Word Notes for Chapter 40 (無 , 有) and Chapter 42 (為 , 無) for terms repeated here.

Chapter Explanation

In the pursuit of learning, one must daily increase one's knowledge. In the pursuit of Dao, one must daily strip away one's perceptions and preconceptions. Strip them away again and again, until one has no perceptions or preconceptions at all, becoming one body with Dao. Acting through nonaction, one is then able to leave nothing undone. Therefore, when the Sage wins all under Heaven, he constantly employs the principle of acting as though there were nothing to do. When he resorts to deliberate contrivance, on the contrary, it is not enough to win all under Heaven.

Discourse

The preceding chapter explained the wondrous function of Dao. But one may worry that people who have not yet attained that level of cultivation will simply lapse into dead emptiness and end up inert and unresponsive, utterly useless — like a clay or wooden puppet. Therefore the text follows immediately with this: in the pursuit of learning, one must daily renew and renew again, study and practice regularly, learn broadly and inquire widely. From breadth, one then returns to the essential; from the myriad particularities, one returns again to the single root. When the time comes to cultivate Dao, one can then strip away perceptions, preconceptions, names, and appearances, preserving only the primal principle. Strip away and strip away again, returning to

emptiness and nonbeing. From emptiness and nonbeing, wondrous existence arises. One knows nothing, yet there is nothing one does not know. One can do nothing, yet there is nothing one cannot do. Even something as vast as all under Heaven can be taken up with a laugh and a bow, without committing a single unjust act or killing a single innocent person. If even winning all under Heaven can be accomplished this way, how much more so everything else — that goes without saying.

(This speaks in the most extreme terms of Dao's wondrous function. It does not mean the Sage harbors a desire to seize all under Heaven.)

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