

Chapter 5



Translation

Heaven and Earth are not benevolent;
they treat the myriad beings as straw dogs.
The Sage is not benevolent;
he treats the hundred families as straw dogs.
The space between Heaven and Earth —
is it not like a bellows?
Empty, yet never exhausted;
the more it moves, the more it brings forth.
Too many words hasten one's ruin;
better to guard the center.

Word Notes

- 𠄎 — "**straw dogs**": Dogs woven from grass, used in sacrificial rites. During the ceremony they are treated with reverence; afterward they are trampled underfoot.
- 𠄎 — "**bellows**": The smelter's instrument for fanning the furnace fire. It is hollow within and has no bottom.
- 𠄎 — "**nozzle**": The mouth of the bellows.
- 𠄎 — "**exhaustion**": Distortion, forced bending.
- 𠄎 — "**guarding the center**": Holding to the center, the middle way.

Chapter Explanation

Heaven and Earth are not benevolent — they bring to life and they kill, leaving the myriad beings to their own natural course. They treat the myriad beings as **straw dogs**. **The Sage is not benevolent** — he gives and he takes away, leaving the hundred families to their own natural course.

The space between Heaven and Earth is just like a **bellows**: empty within, yet never distorted or exhausted. The more it moves, the more breath comes forth. If one speaks too many words, one repeatedly runs into dead ends. **Better to guard the center**.

Discourse

This chapter is about Laozi observing the people and beings of all under Heaven. Regardless of what era, regardless of what country — there is none that does not live and die, die and live, going back and forth, turning upside down, suffering without limit. They are like a speck of dust spinning in the vast sky, unable to control their own course. Suddenly they spin upward; suddenly they spin down again. Up and down, up and down, without rest.

And yet if we trace the root cause of this suffering, we cannot help but lay it at the feet of Heaven and Earth. The people and myriad beings were all born of Heaven and Earth. Where there is birth, there cannot but be death. The very benevolence of Heaven and Earth in giving birth to things is, in fact, the very cruelty of Heaven and Earth in destroying them. Moreover, at the time of giving birth, no matter how wretched a thing may be, they give it life — seeming to value it greatly. At the time of destroying, no matter how fine a thing may be, they destroy it all the same — seeming to hold it in utter contempt. And so the text says they treat the myriad beings as straw dogs.

The Sage follows the natural course of Heaven and Earth, and does the same. But Heaven and Earth do not intentionally give birth to things or intentionally destroy them. The underlying principle of the space between Heaven and Earth is one of coming and going, of endless cycling. Heaven and Earth operate without intention: in giving birth to beings, they do not love them; in destroying beings, they do not hate them. They simply nourish what grows upright and topple what leans — leaving the myriad beings to their own natural course. If Heaven and Earth intentionally loved things, giving birth without ever destroying, then the process of transformation would reach exhaustion.

Therefore one must break through all names and forms, all names and words, empty the heart, and guard the center. One must transcend beyond Heaven and Earth — only then will one not be toppled and turned by the cycles of fate.

For Laozi foresaw that in later ages, those who study Dao would inevitably misunderstand the scriptures and become bound by them. Some would split into sects and factions. Some would drill into texts and literary niceties. Some would be obstructed by principles. Some would be fixated on doctrines. They would do nothing but mouth-level study and book-level morality — pedantic and useless, utterly without practical effect. Those of a lower sort would further degenerate into superstition, unable to rely on their own strength, depending on Heaven and Earth, looking up to sages and spirits for help. They do not realize that though Heaven and Earth are fond of giving life, they cannot protect a person; though sages and spirits are compassionate, they cannot save a person.

Even the words that sages, spirits, immortals, and buddhas use to instruct people — whatever can be spoken in words and pointed to by name — are all one-sided teachings, teachings with an opposite. Whatever has a good side also has a bad side. The Buddha said, "Inconceivable, inexpressible." Confucius said, "I wish to speak no more." And when Confucius spoke of the six virtues and six blindnesses — six virtues that, without learning to temper them, become six defects — he meant the same thing.

And so, having no choice but to argue from the root source, Laozi directly calls Heaven and Earth and the Sage "not benevolent" — this is to shatter people's superstitious dependence. When he

says "too many words hasten one's ruin," this is to shatter people's fixation on doctrine. "Guard the center" is to show people where their home lies. How lofty! How consummate! How miraculous and wondrous!

Long ago, Shakyamuni preached the Dharma as teacher of gods and humans, and his voice was the lion's roar. Laozi speaks the truth about Heaven and Earth and the Sage, enabling people to transcend above the realm of gods and humans — is this not the dragon's call? But when the lion roars, all the mountains tremble — it is more than enough to move people. The dragon's call, however, is subtle and hard to fathom. If you are not a kindred spirit, you will find nothing of interest in hearing it.

And so people are still happy to study the Buddhist scriptures. Laozi is simply not ranked alongside Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. His book is even regarded as something like arsenic and poison. This is truly looking at a great sage whose spiritual transformations are beyond all reckoning — through the eyes of the mundane world.

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