

Chapter 53



Translation

Were I to have the least scrap of knowledge,
I would walk upon the great road —
my only dread: ostentation.

The great road is perfectly level,
yet the people prefer the byways.

The court is harsh and exacting,
the fields lie overgrown and desolate,
the granaries stand utterly empty —
yet they dress in embroidered finery,
bear sharp swords at their sides,
gorge themselves on food and drink,
hoard wealth and goods beyond all need.
This is called the ringleader of thieves.
How far this is from Dao!

Word Notes

- 一 — "**solitary; steadfast**": standing alone, unwavering.
- 一 — "**ostentation; boasting**": showing off, self-display.
- 一 — "**level; even**": flat, smooth, without obstacles.
- 一 — "**byway; shortcut**": a strange and out-of-the-way narrow path.
- 一 — "**harsh; exacting**": severe scrutiny in governance.
- 一 — "**overgrown; desolate**": wild and uncultivated.
- 一 — "**granary**": a storehouse for grain and rice.
- 一 — "**sated; surfeited**": having eaten one's fill and more.
- 一 — "**wealth; assets**": money, material goods.
- 一 — "**reed pipe**": a musical instrument made from bamboo tubes; it leads the five tones — when one plays, all harmonize. Hence "the ringleader of thieves": the one who sets the tune for thievery.

Chapter Explanation

Were I to stand alone with true knowledge, I would be able to walk the great road. My only dread would be **ostentation** — self-aggrandizement. The **great road** is inherently perfectly level. Yet the people prefer to walk strange, out-of-the-way byways.

In the **court**, governance and punishment are harshly exacting. The **fields** are utterly overgrown and desolate. The **granaries** are empty and bare. Yet despite this, people still indulge in luxury: wearing **embroidered finery**, carrying **sharp swords** at their sides, indulging their appetites to **gorge on food and drink**, and greedily hoarding so that **wealth and goods pile up in excess**. This is called **the ringleader of thieves**. How far this is from Dao!

Discourse

The great road is inherently perfectly centered and perfectly upright, level and broad. One may walk it back and forth throughout a lifetime, peacefully and without incident. Unfortunately, people find the great road bland and without flavor — not as interesting as the strange byways, where one can find allurements of sound, beauty, and material goods, free to indulge at will. And so they abandon the proper road and turn down the crooked byways, seeking to dress in embroidered finery, gorge themselves on food and drink, amass wealth and goods, and flaunt their might. Little do they realize that the byways are places where bandits lie in wait. There is great danger ahead.

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