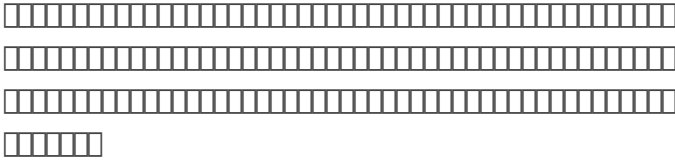


Chapter 64



Translation

What is settled is easy to hold.
What shows no sign yet is easy to plan for.
What is brittle is easy to break.
What is minute is easy to disperse.
Act before things come into being;
govern before disorder arises.

A tree you can wrap your arms around
was born from a hair's tip.
A nine-storied terrace
rose from a heap of earth.
A journey of a thousand li
begins beneath your feet.

Those who contrive defeat things;
those who cling lose them.
Therefore the Sage acts without contrivance and so meets no defeat,
clings to nothing and so suffers no loss.

When people take up their affairs,
they often ruin them just as they near completion.
Be as careful at the end as at the beginning,
and no affair will come to ruin.

Therefore the Sage desires what others do not desire
and does not prize what is hard to obtain.
The Sage learns what others do not learn
and restores what the multitude has left behind.
Thus the Sage assists the natural unfolding of the myriad things
and does not dare to act.

Word Notes

- □ — "**brittle**": When a thing is young and tender, it snaps easily.
- □ — "**to snap**": To break apart, to split.
- □ — "**a hair**": The finest hair — here, the smallest possible beginning.

Chapter Explanation

When all under Heaven is **settled**, it is easy to maintain. When affairs have **not yet shown their first signs**, they are easy to plan for. When things are **brittle**, they are easy to break. When things are **minute**, they are easy to disperse. One must **act on things before they have come into being** and **govern before disorder arises**. A tree you can wrap your arms around **grew from a hair's tip**. A nine-story terrace **rose from the first pile of earth**. A journey of a thousand li **begins right under your feet**. But all these things follow their natural course. If one **acts upon them with contrivance**, they are defeated. If one **clings to them rigidly**, they are lost. Therefore the Sage **acts without contrivance** and so meets no defeat; **clings to nothing** and so suffers no loss. The affairs that **common people** undertake often **come near to completion only to be ruined**. If one is as **careful at the end as at the beginning**, there will be no ruined affairs. Therefore the Sage **desires what others do not desire** — not prizing goods the world hungers after. The Sage **learns what others do not learn** — and restores what the multitude has left behind. In this way, the Sage **assists the natural unfolding of the myriad things** yet does not dare to act with contrivance.

Discourse

This chapter continues to elaborate the meaning of the preceding chapter, and its message is extremely clear. As for the words "desire what is not desired" and "learn what is not learned" — together with the first three phrases of the preceding chapter, they share the same meaning. They all teach that in undertaking affairs, one should pursue the endeavors that others do not pursue. If you wait until everyone else is already doing it before you act, your labor will bear no fruit. And if others are already doing it, there is no need for you to do it as well. In seeking learning, one should pursue the studies that others do not study. If you wait until everyone else is already studying it before you begin, your learning will be of no great use.

Does not the ancient poem say:

“ The poet's pure scene lies in early spring,
when green willows have barely turned half yellow.
If you wait for the imperial gardens to blaze like brocade,
everyone who steps outside will be watching the flowers.

But Laozi's point here is not to teach people to chase after cleverness or profit. His meaning is to teach people either to embrace the broken and guard the incomplete — preserving and continuing the lineage of Dao — or to blaze new trails and open fresh paths, awakening the people's

understanding.

I have deep feelings about these words "learn what is not learned." For I have long borne an undeserved reputation, and through the mistaken kindness of various distinguished gentlemen, many have wished to send me to school to study. But fate was unkind and fortune thin. My grandfather, because my mother, the late Madam Wang — taboo name Chongmeng, courtesy name Jingfan — had spent seven years at the Shandong Public No. 1 Normal School and died of illness just as she was about to graduate, was so grief-stricken that he absolutely refused to let me attend school. And so I was prevented from studying Dao together with my fellow students. Now I am already thirteen years old, still without accomplishment. The learning that others study, I have not been able to study; the learning that others do not study, I do not understand either. Have I not failed the earnest hopes of all the world?

And yet — my fate being what it is — since I dare not compete with others for the common forms of learning, I have quietly resolved to study a little of what others do not study. If there are others in the world who share my plight and feel the same sympathy, they too might join in this inquiry. Let me announce in advance the subjects I wish to study. Because I lack ability, I dare not set as many subjects as a proper school. I have set only two.

One subject is the very newest learning — what will begin to show its first sprouts in five years, become slightly useful in thirty years, and reach full flourishing only after more than nine hundred years. The other subject is the very oldest learning — taking the Qing dynasty as its starting point and tracing back to before the time of Pangu. When the new learning has run its course, the old learning will take its place. New and old revolve in mutual succession. The two subjects merge into one, and there is no longer any distinction between new and old. This is something one must study before one can know, study before one can do. Yet if one turns inward and seeks the innate knowledge and innate ability that are already one's own, is there not also that which can be known and done without study?

Is not my aspiration absurdly impractical? But it is not that I am happy to be this way. It is the times, it is fortune, it is fate. Heaven took my mother from me — and so it is. Heaven has specially appointed me to learn what others do not learn.

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:37:23 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:43:44 UTC by Phil