

Chapter 8



Translation

The highest good is like water.
Water excels at benefiting the myriad beings yet does not contend.
It settles where others disdain to dwell —
thus it draws near to the Dao.
In dwelling, excel at finding the right ground.
In heart, excel at depth.
In giving, excel at benevolence.
In speech, excel at trustworthiness.
In governance, excel at bringing order.
In affairs, excel at competence.
In action, excel at timing.
It is precisely through not contending
that one remains free of blame.

Word Notes

- 卮 — "**giving**": To bestow, to give to others.
- 咎 — "**fault**": Error, blame.

Chapter Explanation

The highest good is just like water. **Water excels at benefiting the myriad beings** yet does not contend with anyone. It settles in the lowest and most humble places that **the multitude loathe** — and therefore comes **close to Dao**.

A person of the highest good: **in dwelling, excels at finding the right ground** — like water, which halts wherever it finds a hollow and does not choose its terrain. **In heart, excels at depth unfathomable** — like water, which is empty, clear, and still. **In giving, excels at benevolence** — like water, which nourishes all living things. **In speech, excels at trustworthiness** — like water, which never fails in its nature to flow downward. **In governance, excels at bringing order** — like water, which washes away filth and levels high and low. **In affairs, excels at competence** — like water, which sets all things in motion. **In action, excels at timing** — like water, which is endlessly lively and responsive. Having all these excellences and still not contending with anyone

— precisely because he does not contend, he is **entirely without fault**.

Discourse

Alas! Today the world is in ruin. War and killing rage across the globe. The dead and wounded number untold tens of thousands. The fires of war have scorched untold tens of thousands of miles. If we trace the disease to its root, it is nothing but the disaster of competition — nothing but the disaster of competing for power and profit. In competing for power and profit, they have in fact lost power and profit. It is truly a great delusion from which they cannot awaken.

If every nation would revere the teachings of Laozi, yield and not contend, there would naturally be harmony, well-being, and joy — a world of genial warmth and radiant ease. How could there be this catastrophe without precedent in all of history?

And yet, when Laozi teaches people not to contend, he is by no means telling them to be pedantic and useless, devoid of any ability, weak and dependent, sitting idle and waiting for natural selection to eliminate them. He simply teaches people not to scramble for power and profit, so as to extinguish the fires of war for ten thousand ages. Moreover, he teaches people to excel at benefiting the myriad beings — to excel at ground, at depth, at benevolence, at trustworthiness, at governance, at competence, at timing — and thereby to possess extraordinary De and extraordinary ability. This is non-contention on the outside, yet contention for substance within; non-contention for position, yet contention for spirit. It is contending through non-contention — not seeking, yet naturally obtaining.

This teaching has a hundred benefits and not a single harm. It is precisely the perfect prescription for the illness of our time. Why do the people of every nation not give it a try?

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