

Chapter 81



Translation

Trustworthy words are not beautiful;
beautiful words are not trustworthy.
Good words need no argument;
argumentative words are not good.
Those who know are not broadly learned;
the broadly learned do not truly know.

The Sage does not accumulate.
The more he lives for others, the more he has.
The more he gives, the more he possesses.

The Dao of Heaven: to benefit, never to harm.
The Dao of the Sage: to act, never to contend.

Word Notes

- 广 — "**broadly [learned]**": Wide, extensive.

Chapter Explanation

Trustworthy words are not refined and beautiful. Refined and beautiful words are not trustworthy. Good words do not require argument. Words of argument are not good. One who truly knows does not seek broad learning. One who seeks broad learning may not necessarily know.

For this reason, the Sage does not seek to accumulate everything upon his own person. Though he does not seek to accumulate upon himself, because he lives for others, he himself grows ever richer. Because he gives to others, he himself grows ever more abundant.

The Dao of Heaven benefits the myriad beings and does not harm them. The Dao of the Sage takes all the affairs of the cosmos as matters within his own nature and shoulders all responsibility, yet does not contend with others.

Discourse

Confucius said: "One's words need not always be trustworthy; one's actions need not always bear fruit." The Buddha, too, often used expedient teachings in preaching the Dharma. From this we can see that the ancient sages did not rigidly cling to trustworthiness. But the sages were not deceiving people. It was for the sake of transforming and ferrying all beings — teaching in accordance with each person's capacity. Had they spoken the true principle directly, people would not have been able to believe it. Since people could not believe it, the sages had no choice but to proceed as they did. But this kind of non-trustworthiness is the idea of teaching through expedient adaptation.

What Laozi says — **"trustworthy words are not beautiful"** — goes a step further.

For trustworthiness is the name of the teaching that is most earnest and solid. Trustworthiness belongs to the element earth; deep De is sufficient to bear all things. Moreover, it contains true humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom within it.

Therefore, in Confucius's teachings, it is in the era of the Great Unity that one first speaks of "practicing trust and cultivating harmony." Laozi, in places where he disparages humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom, never disparages trustworthiness. Only in this chapter does he say "trustworthy words are not beautiful" — which seems different from what came before.

What people do not realize is this: the earlier emphasis on trustworthiness was spoken for the era when the Great Unity is first inaugurated. This statement that "trustworthy words are not beautiful" is spoken for the era when the Great Unity has evolved to its ultimate extreme.

For at that time, everyone would already practice trust and cultivate harmony. Then a further evolution must occur: even trustworthiness itself would no longer be needed. When people devote themselves to trustworthiness, there arises a calculating mind about how to establish trust — this inevitably falls into attachment to marks. Therefore even trustworthiness must be cast off. People would simply act from their innate nature and move at Heaven's impulse, no longer knowing what trustworthy or untrustworthy means. Whatever should be said, they say; whatever should be done, they do. Not only would they have no mind to establish trust in themselves, they would have no mind to demand trust of others. Everyone would simply forget one another's merit and be joyful together.

This at last reaches the realm of divine transformation.

The phrases earlier in this chapter — **"good words need no argument"** and **"those who know are not broadly learned"** — all carry this same meaning. Were one to take post-celestial reasoning to discuss this, how could it ever be understood?

But evolving to this level is by no means easy. It requires a great sage to emerge several thousand years beforehand and begin to advocate: taking the affairs of the cosmos as matters within one's own nature; possessing a capacity for shouldering responsibility as rich as Yi Yin's; embodying the Dao of Heaven that benefits all under Heaven without harming it; in all things living for others, not for oneself; giving to others, not seeking precedence. Only in this way can it gradually be brought about.

I, this young student, humbly believe that the present time is precisely the era of practicing trust and cultivating harmony. It is also an era when heterodox doctrines run rampant and right and wrong must be distinguished. It is an era when the teachings of all lands and all ages lie jumbled together, needing to be integrated and unified.

Laozi's several phrases about beautiful words not being trustworthy — these must still wait for a future day to be put into practice.

But the words about living for others and not for oneself, giving to others and not seeking precedence, shouldering the affairs of all under Heaven and all ages, embodying the Dao of Heaven in benefiting others without harming them — **these are the exact medicine for today's ailment. There is not a moment to lose.**

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-10 22:38:10 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-13 01:44:17 UTC by Phil