Chapter 16: Careful Speech and Cautious Conduct

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Careful speech means not being careless with one's words. Cautious conduct means exercising care and inspection over one's actions. A person's speech and actions should always be expressed in due measure. If they are not expressed in due measure, then troublesome incidents will arise. In minor cases, one's own reputation is ruined, and one suffers slander, contempt, and exclusion. In major cases, one drags in the wider community and invites all manner of trials and tests, suffering humiliation and defamation.

Therefore Confucius warned people to be careful in speech, saying: "The noble person desires to be slow in speech." He also said: "To speak before it is one's turn is rashness; to remain silent when it is one's turn to speak is concealment; to speak without reading the other's expression is blindness." He also said: "If one can speak with someone but does not, one loses that person. If one cannot speak with someone but does, one wastes one's words." Zi Gong also said: "A single word can mark one as wise; a single word can mark one as unwise. One cannot be anything but careful with words." Cautious conduct means guarding against error and correcting faults; do not be careless and inattentive, lest unexpected incidents occur.

In sum, "careful speech and cautious conduct" tells people that in their words and actions they should be cautious and watchful, apprehensive and fearful; vigilant in small matters, vigilant in solitude; never departing from this in a single thought. Therefore in our cultivation of Dao, any word or deed that benefits Dao or supplements it, we carry out. Otherwise, we refrain.

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