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# Accomplishing Everything by Doing Nothing: An Exploration of the Philosophy of Life in the “Laozi”

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**Abstract:** ***The five-thousand-character text of the Laozi discusses the methods by which the sage governs the world. When interpreted from a perspective concerned with the care of life, we can experience its solicitude for the authentic existence of human beings. The Laozi embodies a quest for the common people's state of "uncontrived wisdom" and a longing for the human "mind free from contention." Within this "non-contention," "weakness" and "tranquility" manifest, appearing to possess the subtle power to move a thousand pounds with a mere four ounces—that is, "The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong." Based on this, and proceeding from the authenticity of life, "wuwei" (non-action) is not a passive choice but a transcendence of finite existence at the level of the Dao. In essence, through caring for human life and engaging in philosophical therapy to apprehend the true meaning of the Laozi's "Dao," we can further perceive the value and significance of life.***

**Keywords:** *Laozi*; The Soft and Weak Overcome the Hard and Strong; Accomplishing Everything by Doing Nothing; Philosophy of Life

## 1. HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE NOT BENEVOLENT; THEY TREAT THE MYRIAD THINGS AS STRAW DOGS

### 1.1 Even Heaven and Earth Cannot Endure Forever

In the *Laozi*, "Heaven and Earth" carry the symbolic significance of the "Dao," establishing the transcendental nature of the *Laozi*'s philosophy of life from a metaphysical plane. Chapter 5 states: "Heaven and Earth are not benevolent; They treat the myriad things as straw dogs. The sage is not benevolent; He treats the common people as straw dogs. The space between Heaven and Earth—is it not like a bellows? Empty yet inexhaustible, the more it moves, the more it yields. Much speech leads invariably to exhaustion. Better to hold fast to the center." This chapter uses the metaphor of the straw dog—a ritual object used in ancient sacrifices: just as a straw dog or earthen dragon is adorned with blue and yellow silks and bound with red cords for use by the priest and grandee, it is valued when in use and discarded immediately afterward. "Heaven and Earth are not benevolent; They treat the myriad things as straw dogs" is not meant as sarcasm. Rather, Heaven and Earth bestow nothing deliberately; the myriad things grow naturally. The sage performs no contrived actions; the common people develop spontaneously. As Wang Bi's commentary notes: "By practicing *wuwei* toward the myriad things, each finds its appropriate function, and none is left unprovided for." This passage cites the straw dog to illustrate the appropriateness of "non-benevolence," deriving the attitude of Heaven, Earth, and the sage from this object lesson. Evidently, "non-benevolence" here carries no critical moral judgment; it describes the natural order of all things from an objective standpoint.

Above "non-benevolence," Laozi speaks of "Sparing speech is natural. Therefore, a whirlwind does not last a whole morning, nor does a sudden shower last a whole day. Who produces these? Heaven and Earth. If even Heaven and Earth cannot make such things last forever, how much less can humanity? Thus, one who pursues the Dao is identified with the Dao; one who pursues De (virtue) is identified with De; one who pursues loss is identified with loss. To one identified with the Dao, the Dao gladly responds; to one identified with De, De gladly responds; to one identified with loss, loss gladly responds. Where trust is insufficient, there is distrust." From the natural principle that storms and showers cannot last, he infers the impermanence of human endeavors. "Being identified with the Dao" expresses an acceptance of this "inability to endure." To identify with the "Dao, De, or loss" is to accept them joyfully, to resonate sympathetically with the Dao. Thus, from the impermanence of Heaven and Earth to the transience of the "straw dog," it is clear that the Dao has serenely accepted the objectivity of impermanence, thereby facing all transient things with greater equanimity.

Following this path, we can understand Laozi's description of the Dao: "There was something formless and complete, existing before Heaven and Earth. Silent and void, standing alone and unchanging, going everywhere yet never wearied, it can be deemed the Mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name; I style it 'Dao.' Forced to give it a name, I call it 'Great.' Great means passing on; passing on means going far; going far means returning. Hence the Dao is great, Heaven is great, Earth is great, and the human being is also great. Within the realm there are four greats, and the human being occupies one of them. Humans model themselves on Earth, Earth models itself on Heaven, Heaven models itself on the Dao, and the Dao models itself on what is spontaneously so (ziran)." This Dao, which conforms to the laws of nature, is reluctantly named "Dao." Here, Laozi emphasizes the significance of the human being. Wang Bi explains: "Humans, by not contradicting Earth, achieve complete security. Earth, by not contradicting Heaven, achieves complete support. Heaven, by not contradicting the Dao, achieves complete coverage. The Dao, by not contradicting nature, attains its essential character. To model oneself on nature means: when in a square, conform to the square; when in a circle, conform to the circle. It entails no contradiction with nature whatsoever." Wang Bi's interpretation implies a reciprocal modeling. That is, human orientation lies in nature. As the highest principle, nature provides the direction for human rationality. This aligns with the earlier statement, "Even Heaven and Earth cannot endure forever, how much less can humanity?" In the context of human existence, Laozi underscores nature's guiding significance for humanity, emphasizing that humans cannot act contrary to natural law. Furthermore, humans must follow the Dao; only by adhering to the Dao can they act in accordance with circumstances. Notably, the phrase "Within the realm there are four greats, and the human being occupies one of them" reveals, to some extent, the role of humanity. As beings with free will, humans instinctively seek benefit and avoid harm. Yet, when faced with right and wrong, they often fall into "self-attachment"; the clinging to permanence is merely one manifestation of this attachment. Laozi suggests that among the responses of identifying with Dao, De, or loss, identifying with the Dao is the more fundamental choice. This choice may serve as a response to humanity's fixation on permanence. While recognizing human existence in daily ethical life, it dissolves the obstinate mind and upholds the natural order of the Dao.

### 1.2 Favor and Disgrace Cause Alarm

As rational beings, existing as "economic man" assumptions within a social environment, humans not only cling to permanence but also frequently harbor anxieties over gains and losses. As Laozi states: "Favor and disgrace cause alarm. Esteem great trouble as one esteems one's own body. What does it mean that favor and disgrace cause alarm? Favor is inferior; obtaining it causes alarm, losing it causes alarm. This is what is meant by 'favor and disgrace cause alarm.' What does it mean to esteem great trouble as one esteems one's own body? The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. If I had no body, what trouble could I have? Therefore, one who values the world as he values his own body may be entrusted with the world. One who cherishes the world as he cherishes his own body may be relied upon with the world." In Chapter 13, Laozi depicts the imbalance of the human heart, swinging repeatedly between gain and loss. Favor and disgrace, gain and loss, are inherently two sides of the same coin, yet individuals bind themselves within these distinct scenarios. As Heshang Gong's commentary notes: "Receiving favor brings alarm, as does being disgraced. To receive favor and honor causes alarm, for being in a high position is like standing at the edge of a deep abyss. Alarm signifies the fear that calamity may return." Conversely, if one has "no body" (no self-attachment), there is no trouble regarding favor or disgrace; one can return to natural circumstances, to a state free from selfish desire and trouble. Further, between favor and disgrace, Laozi introduces a greater gain and loss: the body upon which human existence depends. The body concerns the dimension of life and death; human birth itself is the greatest "alarm." Generally, people project beautiful aspirations and blessings onto life, yet they vehemently reject death. Such profound sorrow and joy constitute a deeper level of favor and disgrace. Hence, Laozi proposes: "The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. If I had no body, what trouble could I have?" How then should one preserve the body? Sima Guang states: "Having a body, one thus has trouble. However, since we possess this body, we should value it and cherish it, follow the principle of nature to respond to affairs, and not indulge passions and desires, thereby avoiding trouble." Preserving life in this manner constitutes self-regard in the sense of the philosophy of life.

From this, we can readily comprehend Laozi's words: "Fame or one's own person, which is dearer? One's own person or material goods, which is more valuable? Gain or loss, which is more harmful? Therefore, excessive love inevitably leads to great expenditure; hoarding much inevitably results in heavy loss. Knowing contentment avoids disgrace; knowing when to stop avoids danger; thus one can endure long." Among the things people value most—fame versus self, self versus goods, gain versus loss—the question of which is weightier constantly troubles the human heart. "Excessive love inevitably leads to great expenditure; hoarding much inevitably results

in heavy loss." In the process of pursuit, one cannot avoid the negative aspects. Laozi offers a heuristic response: "Knowing contentment avoids disgrace; knowing when to stop avoids danger; thus one can endure long." In the face of external pursuits, knowing contentment and knowing when to stop is not merely a choice but a posture of life itself. This transcends comparisons of fame/self, self/goods, and gain/loss, directing a more profound gaze toward the normative state of life: knowing when to stop (zhi). This is care for life, contemplating from a broader perspective that life does not exist for wealth, goods, or fame, but rather preserves itself by following the principle of nature. Corresponding to the earlier discussion of favor and disgrace, "knowing when to stop" is a value choice of self-regard. Moreover, from the major premise that "Heaven and Earth cannot endure forever," life is seen as even more transient. Within this brevity, considerations of fame, goods, and gain appear even more trivial; yet people often indulge in them, oblivious to the greater importance of the authentic existence of life. In essence, the heart of gain and loss is universal. How to address the alarm of favor and disgrace is something every life must carefully consider. "Knowing when to stop" may represent a more composed attitude for preserving the more precious thing: life itself.

### 1.3 For the Belly, Not for the Eye

Amidst gain and loss, people often find it difficult to accept the situation gracefully. Laozi, however, perceived the harm inherent within: "The five colors blind the eye. The five tones deafen the ear. The five flavors dull the palate. Racing and hunting madden the mind. Rare goods tempt one to err. Therefore, the sage is for the belly, not for the eye. Hence he discards the latter and chooses the former." People often lose themselves in colors, tones, flavors, the chase, and rare goods. Yet excessive pursuit yields contrary results, destroying human life, manifesting specifically as blindness, deafness, dullness, madness, and misconduct. People have forgotten the original intent behind seeking these things. How then to find balance? Laozi presents the sage's approach: "For the belly, not for the eye." "Eye" clearly signifies the consequences of excessive pursuit of external desires mentioned above. "Belly" represents the opposite: a wiser way of engaging with external desires. Excessive greed is a heavy burden on life. This helps us understand Laozi's words: "Eliminate sageliness, discard wisdom, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Eliminate benevolence, discard righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and parental affection. Eliminate craftiness, discard profit, and thieves and robbers will disappear. These three things—culture is insufficient to sustain them. Therefore, the people must have something to which they can attach themselves: Manifest plainness, embrace simplicity, reduce selfishness, and have few desires. Eliminate learning and be without care." Excessive greed is not limited to the pursuit of colors and flavors; according to Laozi, excessive calculation, restrictive benevolence and righteousness, and opportunistic profit-seeking are all manifestations of human greed. These elements, so valued in daily ethical life, constitute a form of bondage. Only by "manifesting plainness, embracing simplicity, reducing selfishness, and having few desires" can one return to the authentic human condition. "Plainness" and "simplicity" denote the unadorned, unhewn state of things. Compared to laborious scheming, this represents a wiser choice.

Without sageliness, wisdom, benevolence, righteousness, craftiness, and profit, would people fall into a life of hardship? Not at all! In Laozi's view, it is precisely these constructs that cause artificiality, contention, and social unrest. Discarding them allows a return to the authentic state of being human. "The people benefit a hundredfold; the people return to filial piety and parental affection; thieves and robbers disappear"—these outcomes are achieved only after eliminating sageliness, wisdom, benevolence, righteousness, craftiness, and profit. Through reduced selfishness and few desires, people's lives return to tranquility, achieving societal stability. This aligns with Laozi's statement: "When the great Dao declines, there is benevolence and righteousness. When wisdom and intelligence emerge, there is great hypocrisy. When the six familial relationships are discordant, there is filial piety and parental affection. When the state is in turmoil, there are loyal ministers." Viewed conversely, when the state is well-ordered and families harmonious, there is no need to extol loyal ministers or filial piety; society naturally presents a stable appearance. Living within such a society, life is undisturbed by external vexations; naturally, desires do not become excessive. This allows for the realization of Laozi's ideal of a small state with few people: "A small state has few people. Though there are contrivances requiring ten or a hundred men, they are not used. The people take death seriously and do not travel far. Though they have boats and carriages, no one rides in them. Though they have armor and weapons, they have no occasion to display them. Let the people return to knotting cords and using them. They find their food sweet, their clothing beautiful, their dwellings restful, and their customs joyful. Neighboring states are within sight of one another; the sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking can be heard. Yet the people grow old and die without having visited one another." Laozi depicts the ideal state: food need not be gourmet, just sufficient to satisfy hunger; clothing need not be splendid, just adequate to provide warmth; dwellings need not be mansions, just enough for shelter; customs need not be elaborate, simplicity itself is joy. Laozi's ideal realm is one where each finds beauty in their own way; the sounds

of cocks and dogs are audible, yet excessive interaction is unnecessary because each is already self-sufficient. As can be seen, Laozi's view of life is similar: life itself requires little external constraint or internal craving. Maintaining a state of simplicity, a tranquil mind content with itself—this is what life needs. As Marcus Aurelius stated, "Happiness lies in doing what man's nature requires." Conforming to the authentic condition of existence is the good life.

In summary, faced with the world of contrived action (youwei), people easily sink into pursuits of wealth, goods, benevolence, and righteousness. Laozi, through the principle that "Heaven and Earth cannot endure forever," inspires an understanding of the Dao. Before the Dao, humans are beings with subjectivity. Rejecting crafty wisdom and profit, and dismantling the secular value pursuits centered on benevolence, righteousness, and wealth, is not merely a process of interaction with the Dao, but more fundamentally, a return to the authentic nature of life.

## 2. THE SOFT AND WEAK OVERCOME THE HARD AND STRONG

Acknowledging human subjectivity before the Dao does not imply that humans should always pursue it with aggressive vigilance. People often adopt a forceful attitude toward sensual pleasures and fame. Daoism presents an alternative discourse. Laozi values tranquility and softness more than hardness and strength, revealing his guardianship over the stillness of life. As Chen Guying notes, the concept of "softness and weakness" intends to discourage reliance on strength to dominate things or behavior that is violent and cruel. "Weakness" points toward the authentic nature of life from a more far-sighted perspective.

### 2.1 Weakness: The Functioning of the Dao

Laozi offers a clear critique of hardness and strength, asserting that "The violent and strong do not die a natural death." He states: "The Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to the myriad things. The myriad things carry Yin on their backs and embrace Yang in their arms, blending the vital breath (qi) to achieve harmony. What people despise is to be orphaned, widowed, or destitute; yet kings and dukes call themselves by these names. Thus, things may be diminished yet thereby increased, or increased yet thereby diminished. What others teach, I also teach: 'The violent and strong do not die a natural death.' I shall take this as the father of my teaching." "The violent and strong do not die a natural death" echoes the idea that "The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong," emphasizing that "The soft and weak are companions of life." To treat weakness as strength shares a similar context with "Rivers and seas are kings of the hundred valleys." Laozi points out: "When humans are born, they are soft and weak; when they die, they are hard and stiff. When the myriad things, plants and trees, are born, they are soft and tender; when they die, they are withered and dry. Therefore, the hard and strong are companions of death; the soft and weak are companions of life. Hence, an army that is hard and strong will not conquer; a tree that is hard and strong will be felled. The great and strong dwell below; the soft and weak dwell above." For humans, being soft and weak at birth—tender bones and muscles—is the sign of life; at death, the corpse becomes hard and stiff. For plants, "soft and tender" versus "withered and dry" distinguishes life from death. From observing natural phenomena, Laozi concludes: "Therefore, the hard and strong are companions of death; the soft and weak are companions of life. Hence, an army that is hard and strong will not conquer; a tree that is hard and strong will be felled." Some interpret "bing" (army) here as "hong" (to burn); a tree that is strong is easily cut down or burned, paralleling "an army that is strong will not win." What constitutes strength, and what constitutes weakness? Laozi offers an unconventional answer. Regarding forceful military action, Laozi holds a negative view: "Fine weapons are instruments of ill omen. All creatures likely despise them. Therefore, one who possesses the Dao does not dwell upon them. In ordinary life, the gentleman favors the left; in warfare, he favors the right. Weapons are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of a gentleman. Only when left with no choice does he use them; calm restraint is best." Laozi believes that those who follow the Dao distance themselves from weapons. Wherever arms go, destruction follows: fields become barren, and people are displaced. As inauspicious objects, all things detest them, and followers of the Dao avoid them. As a manifestation of "hardness and strength," Laozi holds that arms should only be used when there is no alternative; "calm restraint" (tian dan) is preferable. This aligns with the previous statement: "The hard and strong are companions of death; the soft and weak are companions of life."

How should one view weakness? Laozi further elaborates: "The softest thing in the world overrides the hardest thing in the world. That which has no substance enters into that which has no crevices. From this, I know the benefit of non-action (wuwei). The teaching without words, the benefit of non-action—few in the world can

attain them." Laozi expresses the wisdom of overcoming the hard with the soft. Nothing in the world is softer than water, yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing surpasses it. Persistently applied, water can pierce metal and stone. "Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can excel it." Attacking with water, nothing solid can withstand it. The wisdom of weakness is vividly demonstrated here: "That which has no substance enters into that which has no crevices." This resonates with the technique of "Cook Ding Carving the Ox" in the *Zhuangzi*: "At the joints there are spaces, and the edge of the blade has no thickness. To insert what has no thickness into spaces—how easily it moves along! There is plenty of room for the blade to play." By following the natural grain of the ox, the cook dismembers it with ease, rather than clashing brute force against bone. This reveals the subtle efficacy of softness. Hence, Laozi's statement "Weakness is the functioning of the Dao" becomes comprehensible. "Returning is the motion of the Dao; weakness is the functioning of the Dao." Weakness manifests at the functional level of the Dao, intimately linked with it. To comprehend the true meaning of the Dao through "weakness" inspires people not to confront situations with hardness and force, but to pursue the unceasing vitality of the Dao with an attitude of calm restraint.

### 2.2 Not Self-Displaying, Therefore One Is Enlightened

With an attitude of "weakness" illuminating the Dao, how should one conduct oneself and live within society? Laozi states: "Not self-displaying, therefore one is enlightened." "Weakness" entails an attitude of humility. As Laozi says: "Bent, therefore preserved whole; crooked, therefore straight; hollow, therefore full; worn, therefore new; having little, therefore gained; having much, therefore confused. Therefore, the sage embraces the One and becomes the model for the world. He does not display himself, therefore he is enlightened; he does not assert himself, therefore he is distinguished; he does not boast of himself, therefore he has merit; he does not glorify himself, therefore he is leader. It is precisely because he does not contend that no one in the world can contend with him. How could the ancient saying 'Bent, therefore preserved whole' be empty words? Truly, one attains wholeness and returns to it." "Bent, therefore preserved whole" aligns with the *Zhuangzi*'s chapter "Under Heaven," which notes: "Lao Dan's Dao: Others seek fortune; he alone sought wholeness." Using wood as a metaphor, "bent" refers to wood too crooked for the carpenter's square, while "straight" refers to correct wood. "Bent, therefore whole" is an ancient adage; only by bending can one avoid calamity. "Having little, therefore gained; having much, therefore confused"—this is the way of nature. Like a tree, the farther one grows from the root, the more one departs from the authentic; having little brings one closer to the root. The sage governs the world by returning to the One, to simplicity (pu). From this, it follows that one conducts oneself in society from a posture of "weakness," moving toward the One and simplicity, walking alongside the Dao. This leads to guidelines for self-conduct: "He does not display himself, therefore he is enlightened; he does not assert himself, therefore he is distinguished; he does not boast of himself, therefore he has merit; he does not glorify himself, therefore he is leader." These "self-" terms refer to the self's perspective. People are often trapped within their own biases—self-display, self-assertion, self-boasting, self-glorification. The results are predictable: those who display themselves are not enlightened; those who assert themselves are not distinguished; those who boast have no merit; those who glorify themselves do not endure as leaders. Overcoming such biases requires a transcendent attitude toward one's own development: "Knowing others is wisdom; knowing oneself is enlightenment. Conquering others requires force; conquering oneself is true strength. Knowing contentment is wealth; acting with persistence is will." Knowing others is wisdom, but it falls short of knowing oneself; self-knowledge brings clarity reaching everywhere. Conquering others demonstrates force, but it is inferior to conquering oneself; self-conquest yields invincibility, with nothing depleting one's strength. This suggests applying intelligence to oneself rather than to others. In the dynamic between self and other, knowing and conquering oneself are preferable. Similar descriptions appear elsewhere: "One on tiptoes cannot stand firm; one striding cannot go far. One who displays himself is not enlightened; one who asserts himself is not distinguished; one who boasts of himself has no merit; one who glorifies himself does not endure. From the perspective of the Dao, these are called 'excess food and redundant actions.' All creatures despise them. Therefore, one who possesses the Dao does not dwell upon them." Viewed from the Dao, self-display and the like are useless; followers of the Dao do not adopt them. Here, the "Dao" embodies a self-cultivation that elevates the dimension of human life in terms of practical effort (gongfu). By transcending the self and viewing oneself with greater humility, one achieves tranquility of mind.

### 2.3 The Sage Treats All as Children

Building on the cultivation of "not self-displaying," Laozi goes further to achieve mental tranquility at the level of the Dao. He writes: "The multitude are joyous, as if feasting upon a great sacrificial ox, as if ascending a

tower in springtime. I alone am placid, giving no sign, like an infant who has not yet smiled. Adrift, as if with nowhere to go. The multitude all have more than enough; I alone seem to be lacking. Mine is indeed the mind of a fool—muddled and murky! The common folk are bright and clear; I alone am dim and dull. The common folk are sharp and discerning; I alone am confused and obscure. Calm like the sea; drifting as if without end. The multitude all have their purposes; I alone am stubborn and boorish. I alone am different from others, in that I value being nourished by the mother." Proceeding from self-cultivation, unlike the boisterous scenes celebrated by the multitude, Laozi uses the "infant" to depict an attitude of detachment. An infant has not yet encountered worldly affairs and knows nothing of great feasts or spring towers, let alone joy, sorrow, or scheming. The sage is serene and composed, adding nothing, indulging in nothing, calmly engaging with the world. "Confused and obscure" (men men) and "dim and dull" (hun hun) contrast with the common folk's "sharp and discerning" (cha cha) and "bright and clear" (zhao zhao). Wang Bi comments: "Having no desire to act, he is muddled and murky, as if doing nothing." The common folk display their brilliance and judge harshly, whereas I remain dim and dull, harboring no desires, simply following nature. In worldly life, the multitude seek to apply themselves and pursue goals, but Laozi values the state of mind that is outwardly desireless and naturally composed.

Regarding the state of the "infant" mind, Laozi further states: "Know the male, but keep to the female, and be a ravine for the world. Be a ravine for the world, and constant De will not depart you; return again to the state of the infant. Know the white, but keep to the black, and be a model for the world. Be a model for the world, and constant De will not err; return again to the limitless. Know honor, but keep to disgrace, and be a valley for the world. Be a valley for the world, and constant De will be sufficient; return again to the uncarved block (pu). When the uncarved block is scattered, it becomes vessels. The sage, making use of them, becomes the chief of officials. Hence, the great carving does not sever." Between female and male, the female loves stillness, the male loves activity; this says the sage maintains stillness. A "ravine" (xi) is low-lying ground toward which water flows and where things gather. Being a ravine for the world ensures that constant De (changde) endures forever, like an infant without desire or knowledge, perpetually returning to the virtue of nature. "Know honor, keep to disgrace" might also be read as "Know the sun (ri), keep to disgrace." White (bai) may be a loan character for sun (ri). These three pairs—female/male, black/white, disgrace/honor—are relative opposites. Ravine (xi) and valley (gu) have similar meanings, both denoting places where water collects. Wang Bi interprets these three phrases in terms of "returning to the end" (fanzhong). Keeping to the female, black, and disgrace appears negative, yet it actually means returning to the root. Things tend to move toward their opposites; returning to the infant, the limitless, and the uncarved block means returning to the original nature of things. Returning to the infant is returning to the human nature of *wuwei* and desirelessness; returning to the limitless is returning to the primordial state of the cosmos; returning to the uncarved block (pu) means not straying far from the Dao. Wang Bi advocated "exalting the root and resting the branches"; this interpretation emphasizes returning to the fundamental root of things. According to Laozi, within secular life, the individual remains undisturbed by external vexations, returning to the natural state of the "infant." Viewed through the lens of "softness," the infant state also responds to humility and weakness, as in "The female always overcomes the male through stillness; through stillness she takes the lower position," "Concentrating the vital breath until it is supremely soft, can you become like an infant?" and "Seeing the small is called enlightenment; preserving softness is called strength." Further, this represents a transcendence beyond "not self-displaying"—an inner transcendence of the self. It involves rising above secular perspectives, detaching from self-scrutiny, and returning to the infant state, thereby drawing closer to the authentic condition of life.

In summary, starting from "weakness" as the functioning of the Dao, Laozi exhorts people to maintain an attitude of humility and prudence. He urges reflection by comparing oneself with the secular multitude, thereby transcending conventional pursuits—"Not self-displaying, therefore one is enlightened." Of course, the "Dao" Laozi aspires to goes further: the state of "returning again to the infant" represents the life realm he seeks. For those mired in worldly anxieties and contrivances, this offers considerable inspiration.

## 3. ACCOMPLISHING EVERYTHING BY DOING NOTHING

Transcending the state of "returning to the infant," Laozi points toward the highest Dao: *wuwei* (non-action). Unlike the Confucian advocacy for *youwei* (deliberate action), Daoism adheres to the attitude of *wuwei*. Faced with the authentic nature of life, it selects a more profound Dao as its value orientation, thereby achieving a state of tranquil existence.

### 3.1 Achievements Made, Yet Not Dwelled Upon

Confucianism pursues an engaged spirit and action in the world, adhering to benevolence and righteousness, and valuing the rectification of names. It approaches life through *youwei*. Daoism, conversely, directs its profound gaze toward the dimension of *wuwei*. Firstly, Laozi opposes deliberate, contrived *youwei*: "The people suffer famine because their superiors consume too much in taxes; therefore they starve. The people are difficult to govern because their superiors engage in deliberate action (youwei); therefore they are difficult to govern. The people make light of death because they seek to live too intensely; therefore they make light of death. Only one who does not act for the sake of living is wiser than one who values life." This passage explains that the exploitation by rulers causes famine, and their contrived actions cause unrest. Wang Bi notes: "The reason the people are deviant and governance is chaotic lies entirely with the superiors, not with the inferiors. The people follow their superiors." This serves as a warning to rulers: arbitrary action makes the people ungovernable and leads to downfall. The ruler's *youwei* disrupts the natural order of the people, hence their difficulty in governing. In this regard, Laozi believes: "Whoever desires to take the world and act upon it (wei), I see that they will not succeed. The world is a sacred vessel; it cannot be acted upon. One who acts upon it will ruin it; one who grasps it will lose it. For among beings, some lead and some follow; some breathe gently and some breathe hard; some are strong and some are weak; some are stable and some precarious. Therefore, the sage discards extremes, discards extravagance, discards excess." Governing the world should not involve many desires or complexities. To act (wei) is to fail and to lose. Governing requires following the root, complying with nature, dealing with things through the way of nature (ziran). Without affectation or excessive external constraints, only by returning to the root of the Dao can the world be well governed. Furthermore, the sage is not deluded by objects of pride and extravagance but distances himself from them, practicing governance through emptiness, stillness, and non-action, complying with the people's natural way. By adhering to the nature of the Dao, preserving the original mind within clarity and stillness, the world will naturally be won over. What need is there to fear that "one who acts upon it will ruin it; one who grasps it will lose it"? This is the *wuwei* of governance that Laozi pursues. However, this *wuwei* is not total laissez-faire. Rather, through the ruler's self-restraint, the people gain greater freedom, achieving societal harmony. As Laozi states: "The highest type of ruler is one whose existence the people are barely aware of. Next comes one whom they love and praise. Next comes one whom they fear. Next comes one whom they despise. Where trust is insufficient, there is distrust. Hesitant, he values his words. When his task is accomplished and his work done, the people all say, 'We did it ourselves.'" Wang Bi comments: "The highest ruler refers to the great person. The great person dwells above, practices the affairs of *wuwei*, and carries out the teaching without words." Among different governance styles, Laozi advocates the highest form—"I do nothing, and the people transform themselves"—where accomplishments naturally follow.

What attitude should follow accomplishment? Laozi further indicates: "The Way of Heaven—is it not like drawing a bow? The high is lowered, the low is raised; the excessive is reduced, the deficient is supplemented. The Way of Heaven reduces the excessive and supplements the deficient. The way of humans is not so: it reduces the deficient to serve the excessive. Who can have excess to offer to the world? Only one who possesses the Dao. Therefore, the sage acts but does not rely on his own ability; accomplishes his task but does not dwell upon it; he has no desire to display his worth." Laozi emphasizes "acts but does not rely; accomplishes but does not dwell; has no desire to display worth." He accepts the results of governance with equanimity, not taking credit. Secular governance, by contrast, often revolves around claiming credit. The governance Laozi advocates returns the people to a tranquil life, respecting life itself. As Laozi states: "The myriad things arise, yet he does not initiate them; they live, yet he does not possess them; he acts, yet he does not rely; he achieves success, yet he does not dwell upon it. It is precisely because he does not dwell upon it that his merit never departs." In summary, Laozi upholds the authentic condition of life, refraining from adding unnecessary disturbance. Even in governance, he does not claim credit, maintaining the method of *wuwei*. The same applies to human life: minimizing disturbance and achieving freedom through tranquility—this is the very dignity of life.

### 3.2 Accomplishing Without Acting

Having discarded deliberate *youwei*, how are we to understand Laozi's notion of "accomplishing without acting"? Laozi states: "The Way of Heaven benefits and does not harm; the Way of the Sage acts (wei) but does not contend." Laozi's "non-action" (bu wei) ranges from minimizing contention to "achieving yet not dwelling upon it"—it is a type of action that complies with nature (ziran). Moreover, Laozi's *wuwei* possesses metaphysical transcendence. As Laozi says: "Without going out of doors, one may know the whole world. Without looking out of the window, one may see the Way of Heaven. The farther one goes, the less one knows. Therefore, the sage knows without traveling, names without seeing, and accomplishes without acting." The sage reflects inwardly, observing others through self-observation, families through his own family, states through his own state. This

embodies the sage's way of emptiness, stillness, and calm restraint. By using oneself to understand others, one may know the world's affairs without stepping outside. How can one see the Way of Heaven without looking through a window? Cheng Xuanying's sub-commentary explains: "The natural principle of the Heavenly Way—without peering through the window lattice, yet with the true mind illuminated within, one beholds the way of nature. This is illuminating truth with wisdom." This aligns with "Without going out of doors, one may know the whole world." In ancient times, observing celestial movements was the duty of the Grand Historian or Grand Musician. Here, it indicates the emptiness and stillness of the Dao, which takes not external, complex phenomena as its object, but perceives them from within. On the political level, *Laozi* proposes *wuwei*: "Whoever desires to take the world and act upon it, I see that they will not succeed. The world is a sacred vessel; it cannot be acted upon. One who acts upon it will ruin it; one who grasps it will lose it." Governing the world requires following its root and nature, dealing with things through *ziran*, without affectation or excessive external constraints. This *wuwei* strips away *youwei*; the ruler must maintain a humble posture. Only in such a political environment can societal stability and harmony be achieved: "I do nothing, and the people transform themselves; I love stillness, and the people rectify themselves; I engage in no business, and the people enrich themselves; I have no desires, and the people of themselves become simple." Laozi emphasizes the ruler's own restraint and self-discipline regarding external desires. From this, it is evident that Laozi's *wuwei* encompasses both inner state and outer behavior, unifying inner emptiness and tranquility with desireless external governance: "The Dao invariably does nothing, yet there is nothing it does not do. If the prince or king could preserve it, the myriad things would transform themselves. If, after transforming, desire arises, I shall suppress it with the nameless uncarved block. The nameless uncarved block is but freedom from desire. Free from desire and still, the world will settle itself." From the *wuwei* of both inner and outer realms, we observe its subtlety: "The Dao invariably does nothing, yet there is nothing it does not do." Furthermore, *wuwei*, as an attribute of the "Dao," not only carries significance for practical cultivation (gongfu) but is also the law of nature and all things. From the perspective of life's value, it entails non-self-harm in external behavior and inner tranquility and detachment, thereby preserving the authenticity of life.

### 3.3 Clarity and Stillness Rectify the World

In Laozi's view of life, the state of *wuwei* leads to "clarity and stillness" (qingjing). This signifies not merely outward behavioral stillness but also inner mental clarity, enabling the symbiotic development of self and other, self and nature. Laozi points out: "Of old, those who attained the One: Heaven attained the One and became clear; Earth attained the One and became stable; the spirits attained the One and became divine; the valleys attained the One and became full; the myriad things attained the One and lived; lords and princes attained the One and became the standard for the world. These are the results. If Heaven were not clear, it would likely crack; if Earth were not stable, it would likely quake; if the spirits were not divine, they would likely dissipate; if the valleys were not full, they would likely dry up; if the myriad things did not live, they would likely perish; if lords and princes were not the standard, they would likely fall. Therefore, the noble takes the humble as its root; the high takes the low as its base. Hence, lords and princes call themselves 'orphaned,' 'widowed,' and 'destitute.' Is this not taking the humble as the root? Is it not? Therefore, the highest renown is to be without renown. Do not wish to be glittering like jade, but dull like stone." "Heaven" holds significant cultural meaning. From the perspective of Heaven's clarity, the *wuwei* of the "Dao" is inherent within it. Earth, spirits, valleys, the myriad things, and lords/princes manifest different forms when aligned with the Dao. From "Heaven" to "humans" (lords/princes), all are manifestations of the way of natural *wuwei*. If lords and princes preserve the Dao, they can govern through emptiness and stillness. If they occupy the high position with rectitude, the world's people will be well governed. This rectitude is the way of "no desire" and "loving stillness"—the *wuwei* manifested by superiors when governing the world. Correspondingly, Laozi states: "Attain utmost emptiness; preserve profound stillness. The myriad things all arise; I observe their return. Things teem and multiply, each returns to its root. Returning to the root is stillness; this is called returning to destiny. Returning to destiny is called the constant; knowing the constant is called enlightenment. Not knowing the constant, acting recklessly, brings misfortune. Knowing the constant brings acceptance; acceptance leads to impartiality; impartiality leads to kingliness; kingliness leads to Heaven; Heaven leads to the Dao; the Dao leads to endurance. To the end of one's days, one will be without danger." Emptiness means freedom from desire; stillness means non-action. "Utmost" (ji) and "profound" (du) describe the supreme realm of the mind. "Return" (fu) means moving from stillness to activity, and back to stillness. Observing the competitive growth of all things, one contemplates their ultimate path of return. Here, Laozi suggests that understanding "stillness" as the root of all things is necessary to know the law of all things, to be all-embracing, and to interact with the "Dao." The "utmost emptiness and profound stillness" Laozi speaks of is not merely a daily ethical pursuit but a realm of life cultivation. Only through stillness can greatness be achieved: "Great accomplishment seems incomplete; yet its utility is unimpaired. Great fullness

seems empty; yet its utility is inexhaustible. Great straightness seems bent; great skill seems clumsy; great eloquence seems stammering. Movement overcomes cold; stillness overcomes heat. Clarity and stillness rectify the world." Laozi uses several "great" terms to argue that profound, macroscopic qualities often manifest in seemingly clumsy ways. "Stillness" among them represents a higher level of mental state. Movement and stillness reflect human physical and mental conditions: movement generates warmth and can dispel cold; stillness calms the mind and can overcome heat. Clarity and stillness embody Laozi's thought of *wuwei* and emptiness; through my own emptiness and stillness, I can govern the world. "Rectify" (zheng) also represents the highest standard of *wuwei*—integrity, impartiality, pure and unmixed. Here, Laozi emphasizes a life view of clarity, stillness, and non-action, facing myriad affairs with a clear and tranquil mind. Amidst the hustle and bustle of secular life, Laozi observes the development of things with a more profound gaze, managing countless matters with a serene mind, demonstrating a wisdom of life.

## 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the *wuwei* of external behavior to the "clarity and stillness" of inner cultivation, Laozi integrates the metaphysical apprehension of the "Dao" with the practical cultivation of conduct at the physical level. As seen in the *Laozi*, restraint is never true weakness but rather the preservation of life's dignity; humility is not synonymous with self-abasement but an affirmation of life's value; "clarity and stillness" is never a foolish choice but a more lucid posture toward life. Amidst affectation and turmoil, Laozi chooses "for the belly, not for the eye." In confrontations with hardness and strength, Laozi upholds "The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong." In the realm of *wuwei*, he attains a life of equanimity and self-consistency.

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