

Dàodéjīng: 8 (excerpt) / 道德經: 八

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The Classic Text

上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處眾人之所惡，故幾於道。

The Translation

Superior aptitude resembles water. Water benefits everything and yet does not contend, but rather goes to the places everyone considers hateful. It is for this reason that it is close to the [utmost method].

The Commentary

The virtuous nature of water is a common theme in ancient Chinese philosophy. As mentioned in the passage above, it has three positive qualities. First, it is universally beneficial. Second, it goes with the flow. Third, it seeks a low (humble, "hateful") position. If someone were to emulate these watery qualities - but in the social sphere - they would certainly be popular. Such a person would help where are able, accept reality as it is and never seek to elevate themselves above others.

Interestingly, if we expand the metaphor, we'll notice that all water flows to the ocean. Now, amongst bodies of water, although the ocean is the lowest (humblest), it is also the deepest and most powerful. With this in mind, perhaps we can imagine what an ocean-like person would be like. Perhaps self-confident to the point of accepting anyone and anything without comment and without a loss of strength?

This sort of oceanic individuality is a distant dream for most, but anyone can put into practice the simpler virtues of the mountain stream or bubbling brook: be of help, follow the current, and seek strength through humility.

Clinically speaking, I'd give this advice as a prescription to my patients if only it didn't require a bit of a lecture first. The first symptom to go would be stress, the second hassle, and the third discontent.

Translation Notes

[utmost method]: Dào 道 is usually translated as 'Way'. The trouble with this translation is that it lends itself to a disembodied interpretation, as though there is some sort of transcendental Way above and beyond ordinary life. 'Method' does not have this drawback.