
Excellence That Is Not Outstanding

1[24]

“A person on tiptoe is not firmly planted {1}
a person in a rush will not go far.”

One who shows off will not shine {2}
one who promotes himself won't become famous
one who boasts of himself will get no credit
one who glorifies himself will not become leader.

In Tao {3}
this is called 'stuffing oneself,' 'overdoing it.'

Things seem to detest this, {4}
so the ambitious man does not dwell here.

(Paraphrase:)¹ Some people try to manufacture increased public stature for themselves by deliberate attention-getting tactics {2}.¹ This is like a simpleton who is on tiptoe because she² thinks that standing higher must necessarily be standing better {1}. Such a manufactured image, like standing on tiptoe, is precarious, an “excess” {3} added above and beyond any solid grounding in reality. Such a person cannot have any genuine success. It is as though her pretentious claims are detested by “things,” by reality itself {4}.

(Analysis:) Saying {1}¹ looks like a common proverb against overextending oneself. Saying {2} is a Laoist* saying⁴ countering³ the tendency of *shih**⁴ toward self-promotion*,⁴ by posing the image³ of the person whose deliberate efforts to impress only turn people off and inhibit his success. Saying {4} is a Laoist saying that could apply to many areas of life, depending on the context in which it is said.

Sections {1} and {3} implicitly characterize the “showing off” of {2} as an “excess.” This implies a background view of reality in which there is a “normal” amount of importance and recognition given to each individual, based on true substantive worth and the part each plays in an organic social whole. The self-promoting person is “excessive” in trying to get more for himself above and beyond this. The rejection of the show-off by “things”⁴ {4} is related to this same idea: *Things* here refers to normative reality as seen from a Laoist perspective, that is, reality as an organically*⁴ ordered whole. This is the reality that “detests” the show-off who violates this organic order by deliberate attempts to “stand out.” Compare the occurrence of {4} in 67[31]:2.¹ “Things detest” weapons of war, and so the soldier out for personal glory by killing others “cannot achieve his purposes in the world” (67[31]:6). This has a quasi-superstitious*⁴ basis. In the Laoist view, people in various ways put themselves out of joint with reality, and reality in turn turns against them. *Tao**⁴ in {3:1} has an adjectival sense, referring to the specifically Laoist way of looking at things.

1. For the arrangement, numbering system, and typographical conventions followed in the translation and commentary, see “How to Read This Book,” pp. ix–x.

2. Paraphrases are partly intended to indirectly suggest the modern relevance of the *Tao Te Ching*, so I freely use *she* in the paraphrases (to counterbalance *he* in the analysis). So far as I know it is unlikely that members of the Laoist school included women.

3. Terms like *counter*, *criticize*, *directed against*, etc. indicate that the saying being commented on is a Laoist polemic aphorism. The target of the aphorism is being countered by “posing an image.” On these elements of the meaning-structure of aphorisms, see pp. 201–05.

4. Asterisks mark topics explained and discussed further in the Topical Glossary, where the key words so marked are listed in alphabetical order.

2[9]

In filling, if you keep on and on—
better to have stopped. {1}
In sharpening, if you keep trying—
the edge won't last long.
When gold and jade fill the halls,
no one can guard it all.
Rich, famous—and conceited:
leading to a downfall self-caused.

Achieve successes, {2}
win the fame,
remove yourself:
Heaven's Way.

A person who gets caught up in the quest for wealth and fame is like a person who keeps pouring after the jar is full, or who keeps filing after the blade is sharp {1}. Such a person is fooled by the momentum of her attraction, pursuing what is attractive beyond the point where it is still really useful. So likewise, when you distinguish yourself in public service, don't avidly capitalize on this for self-promotion. The highest Way is to do a great job and quietly move on {2}.

Saying {1} is a rhymed saying presenting both accumulated wealth and pride in one's success, as a kind of "excess" that is precarious (similar to the Greek concept of hubris. Compare 1[24]). Saying {2} counters the tendency toward self-promotion* by posing the image of the *shih** who quits his government post just when he is becoming successful. The contrast between the two sayings has a specific basis in Laoist thought: Real worth is typically hidden worth, whereas those qualities that win public recognition typically are less solid and genuine. A person who tries to capitalize on the attention-getting aspect of his accomplishments to further his career {2} is relying on the *less* solid part of what he has done. The person who gets his self-esteem from being rich and famous {1} is a more extreme example of this same tendency and so puts himself in an even more precarious position.

The first three chapters in this Section 1 (1[24], 2[9], 3[67]) all have to do with precarious "excess." (See also 19[44]:2, 62[29]:4).

3[67]

Everyone in the world says of me: {1}
 'great—but doesn't seem normal.'
It's just 'greatness'—
 that's why it does not seem normal.
If I were normal,
I'd have been of little worth for a long time now.

I have three treasures, {2}
I protect and keep hold of them.
The first is called 'gentleness'
the second is called 'frugality'
the third is called 'not presuming to act
 like leader of the world.'

Gentle, so able to be bold
frugal, so able to be lavish
not presuming to act like leader of the world,
 so able to become head of a government.

Now:
To be bold without being gentle
to be lavish without being frugal
to act like leader without putting oneself last:
This is death.

Yes, gentleness: {3}
"Attack with it and you will win
defend with it and you will stand firm."

When Heaven wants to rescue someone, {4}
it surrounds him with a wall of gentleness.

There are loud and outgoing qualities (being bold, lavish, self-assertive), and there are quiet and retiring ones (being gentle, frugal, self-effacing). When outgoing qualities exist by themselves, they are typically the result of artificial effort, and so lack grounding in reality. An identity founded on this is precarious, insecure, “death” inviting. But the outgoing qualities are not wrong in themselves. One whose basic identity resides in the quiet virtues has a safe and solid basis for herself. Such a one can be bold and lavish on occasion, or occupy the highest social positions, without danger {2}. Quiet virtues like gentleness have a quality about them that acts as a magical protection, whatever situation one is in {3–4}.

Quiet virtues intensely cultivated—“taken to an extreme” by normal standards—make one appear not only quiet but odd {1}. But it is normal standards that are at fault in this: “Extremism” in the service of what is truly good is the right way. There is reason to worry if one is *not* a little odd.

Saying {1} is related to sayings countering the tendency to admire only impressive appearances*. The “I” is anonymous, but the image of the “great but not normal” person probably has primary reference to teachers* in the Laoist school, held up as models for others (compare 45[70]:2–3). Saying {2} is a saying against the tendencies of the upper classes toward assertiveness, conspicuous consumption, and self-promotion*. “Death” is hyperbole, portraying the “dangerous” precariousness of this. There seems no *practical* basis for the implication that the quieter virtues give one’s life a “safe” foundation. The most likely basis is rather the one suggested in 1[24]: Loud self-assertion is precarious because it lacks a firm basis in (normative) reality.

In juxtaposing {1} and {2}, the composer draws on the Laoist association between personal qualities that attract little notice at all {2} and qualities that make one appear positively odd or disreputable {1} (see 4[22]). Saying {3:2–3} looks like it could be a common saying applicable to a variety of things. In their thrust, both {3} and the composer’s addition in {4} function as celebratory sayings that portray the marvelous benefits of the quality “gentleness,” which Laoists cultivate. (See “Benefits*” for further notes on this genre of sayings.)

4[22]

"Bent—then mature." {1}

Compromised—then upright {2}
Empty—then solid
old and spent—then young and sprightly.

A little—then a gain {3}
a lot—then confusing.

And so the Wise Person: {4}
Embraces The One Thing,
and becomes the Shepherd of the World.

He does not show off, so he shines {5}
he does not promote himself, so he becomes famous
he does not boast of himself, so he gets the credit
he does not glorify himself, so he becomes leader.

He just does not contend {6}
and so no one can contend with him.

What the ancients said: "bent—then mature," {7}
is this an empty saying?
This is true maturity, turn back to it.

There are two parts to human goodness: The part that makes a good impression in the social world, and the part that is simply good. The part that makes a good impression is easily counterfeited. So the “purest” image of goodness is found in those persons who are good but do not appear so: A person who has great integrity but who appears compromised, a person of substance who appears “empty,” and so on {1–2 and 7}. One who rests in this kind of goodness does not join the social competition for high status {5–6}. She realizes, for example, that a little bit of knowledge deeply understood may not impress others, but is actually more valuable than simply memorizing a lot of information {3}. Quantity impresses, but what one needs is only to turn back to the One Simple Thing, a certain quality of mind embodying pure but hidden goodness—this is the Center of the World {4}.

I believe {1} is a folk proverb to the effect that the negative, “bent” appearance of old people is a sign of something positive, their maturity. Saying {2} is a Laoist saying against admiring only impressive appearances*, posing the counterimage of fine qualities that appear negative on the surface. (Some of the wording, such as “compromised/upright,” recalls similar sayings in 5[45]:1–2, see comments there). *Confusing* in {3} suggests that, despite the parallelism with {2}, this saying is on a different topic. It criticizes the view that gaining understanding* consists in widespread study or information gathering, posing the counterimage of the person whose multifarious knowledge only confuses him (compare 41[47]:2). Saying {4} celebrates the cosmic* importance of Laoist self-cultivation, described here as “embracing* the One* Thing.” (“Shepherd of the World” is a traditional designation of the Emperor*.) Sayings {5} and {6} are sayings against self-promotion*. Saying {5} (a version of 1[24]:2) evokes the image of the person whose self-effacing manner elicits the admiration of others and wins influence. Saying {6} (= 55[66]:4) expresses the Laoist view that the ideal person, by refusing to compete (contend*) for social status, becomes in fact superior to all.

The image evoked in {2}, of great qualities hidden under negative appearances, expresses in more extreme fashion the advocacy of a self-effacing attitude in {5} and {6}. “The One Thing” that Laoists cultivate in themselves was felt by them to be something conventionally looked down upon (see 14[23]:3, 35[39]:2), and this association connects {2} and {4}. A connection between embracing this *One Thing* (“a little”), on the one hand, and having a multifarious store of impressive knowledge on the other {3} also may be intended. The composer frames* the chapter with a reference to the same traditional saying in {1} and {7}.

5[45]

The greatest perfection will seem lacking in something {1}
but its usefulness never ends.

The greatest solidity will seem Empty
but its usefulness is inexhaustible.

The greatest uprightness will seem compromised {2}
the greatest ability will seem clumsy
the greatest eloquence will seem tongue-tied.

“Agitation overcomes cold {3}
Stillness overcomes heat.”

Purity and Stillness are the Norm of the World. {4}

Cultivating personal qualities that impress others takes constant effort, and so is mentally tiring. And in the absence of an audience, what good are they really? Look within for qualities of mind that are inherently satisfying to yourself, and cultivate these instead. These qualities will always appear in the conventional world as something worthless or not quite right {1–2}. But they sustain themselves, and so will be an inexhaustible source of real satisfaction to you {1}. In them your mind can find rest and stillness—that Stillness which is the Center of the world {4}.

Sayings {1} and {2} counter the tendency to admire only impressive appearances*, posing contrasting images of a kind of true internal greatness that, however, has a negative external appearance. *Perfection* in {1} is more literally “completeness,” that is, a personal character “brought to completion” (see 10[7]:3, 44[41]:4, 65[51]:1:4, 71[63]:5). *Solidity** is more literally “fullness”: I take it to describe a person whose presence seems “substantial,” in contrast to someone who appears worthless, *Empty** (see 6[15]:2 and 4). The Laoist contrast to the showiness of fine appearances is “usefulness,” which probably refers to a concrete sense of personal satisfaction in one’s own being. (Compare the image of inexhaustibly useful Emptiness in 16[5]:2, the useful Nothingness in 15[11], and the fruit/flower image in 11[38]:7). *Upright/compromised* in {2} is more literally “straight/bent,” but the *Mencius*¹ uses these same words to describe moral integrity and moral compromise, respectively. Saying {3} is a celebratory* saying borrowed from contemporary speculation about the “conquest cycle,” concerning which physical/psychic energy “overcomes” (“conquers”) which other. Here a two-line saying is quoted from this speculation, of which only the second line—about how the energy Stillness* conquers its opposite, agitation*—is relevant to Laoist thought (see “Conquest*”). Saying {4} is celebratory, celebrating Stillness as a cosmic* norm.

The composer’s associations between {1–2} and {3–4} here probably depend on the fact that achieving an impressive appearance requires “working*” (see 11[38]:2–3), that is, a mind stirred into activity, as opposed to the deep mental Stillness Laoists associate with a more “natural*” (but less impressive) way of being. This same association underlies the juxtaposition of sayings in 6[15]:2–3.

Three chapters grouped together here (4[22], 5[45], and 6[15]) urge cultivation of good personal qualities that appear negative or Empty*/worthless from a conventional point of view.

1. 3B/1.

6[15]

The Excellent *shih* of ancient times {1}
penetrated into the most obscure,
the marvelous, the mysterious.
They had a depth beyond understanding.

They were simply beyond understanding, {2}
the appearance of their forceful presence:
Cautious, like one crossing a stream in winter
timid, like one who fears the surrounding neighbors
reserved, like guests
yielding, like ice about to melt
unspecified, like the Uncarved Block
all vacant space, like the Valley
everything mixed together, like muddy water.

Who is able, as muddy water, {3}
by Stilling to slowly become clear?
Who is able, at rest,
by long drawn-out movement to slowly come to life?

Whoever holds onto this Tao {4}
does not yearn for solidity.

He simply lacks solidity, and so {5}
what he is capable of:
Remaining concealed, accomplishing nothing new.

Cultivating mental depth {1} means fostering a deep Stillness {3}, and coming to exist at a level of mind that, from a conventional perspective, seems to have no existence {4–5}. It appears vacant, unspecific, un-definite {2:7–9}. The person who has it has a magically forceful presence, which however typically presents an appearance of hesitation and timidity {2:3–6}. Her great achievement is to blend in perfectly, to do nothing that appears strikingly new and different {5}.

Saying {1} reflects one of the ideals of Laoist *shih**: To become a person who understands* things “in depth,” which for them meant primarily cultivating the depths of one’s own mind (see 43[1]:5). Here this ideal is projected onto an idealized ancient* time, when immensely “deep” *shih* advised the legendary great emperors. Saying {2:3–6} is related to sayings against self-promotion*, countering the common admiration of an aggressive and forceful presence by posing somewhat exaggerated images of the opposite kind of person. Lines {2:7–9} are probably added by the composer. (They interrupt a rhyme scheme, and they switch from describing external appearances to describing an internal state and from everyday metaphors to the more technical Laoist terms, *Uncarved** *Block* and *Valley**. Line {2:9} may be a connective* link to {3}. My translation of *ch’iang wei* [lit. “strong working”] as “forceful presence” in {2:2} [and in 39[25]:2:3] is new. Others translate “[I will] *ch’iang*/try to *wei*/render their appearance....”) Saying {3} is meditation* instruction: One first brings the mind from a state of busy-ness to Stillness*, and then gradually returns to being mentally active (see comments on 33[55]:2.) Saying {4} (a version of 31[4]:1) is an instructional saying giving a normative* description of what one is like who embodies Laoist Tao*—he will not yearn for a “solid*” (lit. “full”) social presence.

The juxtapositions here suggest that “not...solid” in {4} is a description of the person of shy and retiring presence described in {2} and the person who remains unnoticed in {5}. *Concealed* also seems connected with the image of the ancient *shih* in {1}, whose minds existed on such a mysterious and deep level that no one could understand them. This is the state of mind and hidden/Empty way of being aimed at by one who cultivates Stillness {3–4}. The sayings in this chapter connect the internal state of the ideal person {1, 3, 4, 5} to a certain kind of external appearance {2:3–6}.

7[8]

The highest Excellence is like water. {1}
Water, Excellent at being of benefit
to the thousands of things,
does not contend—
it settles in places everyone else avoids.
Yes, it is just about Tao.

Excellence in a house: the ground {2}
“Excellence in a mind: depth
Excellence in companions: Goodness
Excellence in speaking: sincerity
Excellence in setting things right: good management
Excellence on the job: ability
Excellence in making a move: good timing.”

Simply do not contend {3}
then there will be no fault.

What makes for a good house is not what gives it a striking appearance, but the solidity of the unseen foundation. Look out for this in other areas of life as well: For example, sincerity in speech and depth of mind do not get as much attention as eloquence and brilliance, but they are more solid {2}. Cultivating truly solid qualities means forgoing social competition and a willingness to accept the lowest rung on the social ladder. But these also are the qualities of most actual benefit to others. Cultivating these should be the main business of anyone truly devoted to helping others in public service, rather than just making a name for herself {1}.

Saying {1} is a saying against self-promotion*, using a nature image as an extended metaphor*. The fact that water flows downward and nourishes plants serves as an image illustrating the Laoist ideals of (a) not contending* with others for high social status, (b) willingness to accept being in a low* and unnoticed position (“which all others avoid”), and (c) devoting oneself to public service (“benefiting the thousands of things”) as a *shih** in government office. To act like this is to identify with the role of Tao* in the world. Saying {2:2–6}, in its idealization of *jen*/Goodness,¹ sincerity, and “good timing,”² reads best as a rhymed saying from some school with a Confucian* bent. Saying {3} is a saying using an oracle* formula to present not-contending* as a “lucky” way to act.

Because the first line of {2} alone is metaphorical, and because it does not rhyme with the rest, I mark it a connective* addition by the composer. The “lowness” of the house’s foundation connects this saying to the theme of lowness (water flowing downward) implicit in {1}. (Compare the low foundation image in 35[39]:2). The composer probably sees the virtues praised in {2} as examples of good qualities that are relatively unimpressive externally (as in the paraphrase). This is why he associates this saying with the Laoist polemic against contending for high social standing {1 and 3}, and with the advice to accept a social position low and unnoticed {1}. He “baptizes” this Confucian saying by relating it to the Laoist theme of “lowness*,” an association facilitated by the occurrence of “depth” in {2:2}.

The same associations apparent in this chapter—criticism of fine appearances, devotion to public service, and “not contending”—also link sayings in the next chapter, 8[81].

1. Words printed in this format represent a Chinese word (*jen*) and an English equivalent (“Goodness”). For further explanation see pp. x–xi.

2. See *Mencius* 5B/1,5.

8[81]

Sincere words are not elegant {1}
elegant words are not sincere.

Excellence is not winning arguments
winning arguments is not being Excellent.

Understanding is not wide learning
wide learning is not understanding.

The Wise Person does not store up for himself. {2}

By working for others {3}
he increases what he himself possesses.

By giving to others
he gets increase for himself more and more.

“Heaven’s Way: to benefit and not to harm.” {4}
The Way of the Wise Person: to work and not contend.

People pretend to be striving for Excellence when they are really just egotistically trying to store up points for themselves by impressing others. These are the people who value elegance over sincerity in speech, and prefer impressive learning to real understanding {1–2}. But the real route to personal worth is not storing up points for oneself in social competition. It lies in selflessly trying to be of service to the people {3–5}.

Saying {1} is a saying against admiring only impressive appearances*, countering this tendency with a series of contrasting images: good qualities that are not impressive on the one hand, and impressive qualities that are empty show on the other. (Saying {1:5–6} is also related to sayings about true understanding*.) Sayings {2} and {3} are sayings against self-promotion*, countering the tendency of *shih** toward a self-centered focus on their own personal ambitions. The contrasting image posed in {3} is that of the *shih* who perfects his own being by selfless service to his society. (The first line of {4} looks like a common saying: Its sentiment is not specifically Laoist, and the parallelism with the last line is very rough.)

In the composer's final line, *wei/work** is an elliptical reference to "working for others" in {3} (compare the similar ellipsis in 51[75]:2)). And "not contending*" is a reference back to the polemic against impressive qualities in {1}. As in 7[8]:1, the contrast is between cultivating impressive qualities with the intention of self-promotion, on the one hand, and self-effacing public service, on the other.

9[79]

"When great hostilities are smoothed over
there is always some hostility left."
How could this be considered good? {1}

And so the Wise Person: {2}
"Keeps hold of the left-hand contract tally,
and doesn't make demands on others."

One who has Te is concerned with fulfilling his contract {3}
one who does not have Te concerns himself
with collecting his due.

Heaven's Way: {4}
Not to have personal favorites,
but to be invariably good to all.

Even when people make up after a fight, hurt and hostile feelings remain. How can the cycle of hurting be broken? The person concerned about her self-importance will always insist on her rights. The person secure in herself can afford to be generous all the time—careful of her responsibilities, but willing to overlook what others owe her. So she can be an agent of peace.

Saying {1}, and possibly {2}, appear to be common sayings, used by the composer as take-off* points for more specifically Laoist ideas. Commentators generally interpret “holding the left-hand tally” to mean being mindful of one’s own obligation. (Contracts in ancient China were sometimes sealed by breaking a tally, each partner keeping one half.) Saying {3} is a normative* description of what one is like who has Te*/virtue:charisma,¹ related to sayings against self-promotion*. The tendency to insist on one’s own rights is countered by the image of the ideal person whose behavior expresses the Te he has inside. Te is associated with self-forgetting generosity with no thought of reciprocation also in 60[49]:2 and 71[63]:3. This idea seems to be the connecting thread throughout for the composer here as well. (Most other translators understand *t’ien heng yü shan jen* in {4} to mean something like “Heaven is always *yü*/with the *shan*/good man.” I understand *yü* in the sense of “bestow” and *yü shan jen* as “bestow kindness on [all] others,” connecting this line to *shan*/good in {1:3} and the theme of unreciprocated generosity to all in {2–3}.)

Three chapters are grouped here (8[81], 9[79], 10[7]) that share the theme of selflessness.

1. Words printed in this format represent a Chinese word before the slash, followed by two or more English equivalents, separated by colons. See pp. x–xi.

10[7]

Heaven is lasting, Earth endures. {1}
What enables Heaven and Earth to last and endure?
Because they do not live for themselves—
so it is that they can live so long.

And so, the Wise Person: {2}
Puts himself last, and so finds himself in front.
Puts himself in the out group, and so maintains his place.

The personal does not exist for him— {3}
isn't this how he can perfect
what for him is most personal?