Chapter 22: Knowinghood Journeyed North

Knowinghood[[1]](#footnote-1) journeyed north beyond Darkwater, ascending the Hills of Hidden Jutting, where he met Nodoing Nosaying. Knowinghood said, “I want to ask you something. What should I think of, what should I consider, in order to know the Course? Where should I settle, what should I serve, in order to rest securely in the Course? What should I follow, what course should I take as my guide, in order to get the Course?” He asked three questions, but Nodoing Nosaying did not answer. It wasn’t that he was unwilling to answer; he did not know to answer, he did not know how to answer, he did not know any answer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Having received no response, Knowinghood traveled back to the south of Clearwater, ascending the Hills of Doubt Silenced, and met Wild and Twisty there. He asked him the same questions. Wild and Twisty said, “Ah! This I know! Let me tell you!” But just as he was about to speak, he forgot what he was going to say.

Still having obtained no answer, Knowinghood returned to the Imperial Palace, where he asked the same questions of the Yellow Emperor.

“Only when you think of nothing and consider nothing,” said the Yellow Emperor, “will you know the Course. Only when you settle nowhere and serve nothing will you rest securely in the Course. Only when you follow nothing and take no course as your guide will you get the Course.”

“Now you and I know this,” said Knowinghood, “while the other two do not. Who is right?”

“Only Nodoing Nosaying is truly right,” said the Yellow Emperor. “Wild and Twisty only seems to be right. As for you and me, we are nowhere near. For ‘he who knows does not speak, and he who speaks does not know. Hence the sage practices the teaching of no words.’[[3]](#footnote-3) The Course cannot be given, and its intrinsic powers cannot be received. But humankindness can be deliberately faked, responsible conduct can do harm, and ritual is just a mutual swindle. Hence it is said, ‘When the Course is lost, there are the intrinsic powers; when the intrinsic powers are lost, there is humankindness; when the humankindness is lost, there is ritual. Ritual is the fruitless flower of the Course, and the beginning of disorder.’[[4]](#footnote-4) And also, ‘To practice the Course requires daily diminishment. Diminish again and yet again, until you reach non-doing, doing nothing and yet leaving nothing undone.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Now you and I have already become *beings*—is it not difficult to return to the root? It is easy only for a Great Man. For life is the follower of death, and death is the beginning of life; who understands the thread that connects them? The birth of man is just a convergence of energy.[[6]](#footnote-6) When it converges, he lives. When it scatters, he dies. Since life and death follow one another, what is there to worry about? It is in this way that all things are one. People take what they consider beautiful to be sacred and wonderful, and take what they dislike to be odious and rotten. But the odious and rotten transform into the sacred and wonderful, and the sacred and wonderful transform into the odious and rotten. Hence it is said, ‘Just open yourself into the single energy that is the world.’ It is for the sake of this that the sage values oneness.”

Knowinghood said, “I asked Nodoing Nosaying, and he gave me no response. Not that he wasn’t willing to answer; he didn’t know any answers. I asked Wild and Twisty, and he didn’t tell me either, although he was just about to. It wasn’t that he decided not to answer; he forgot what he was going to say. Now I have asked you and you know the answer. Why do you say you are nowhere near it?”

The Yellow Emperor said, “The one is truly right, because he does not know. The other seems right, because he forgot. But you and I are nowhere near it, because we know it.”

When Wild and Twisty heard about this conversation, he concluded that the Yellow Emperor was a man who truly knows all about words.

Heaven and earth possess vast beauties but speak no words. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities but offer no opinions. Each of the ten thousand things is perfectly coherent[[7]](#footnote-7) but gives no explanations. The sage traces back to the beauties of heaven and earth and thereby reaches through to the coherence of the ten thousand things. Thus it is that “the Utmost Person does nothing[[8]](#footnote-8), the Great Sage initiates nothing”: that is to say, they merely cast their gaze over heaven and earth. For the illumination of their imponderable spirits is refined to its purest kernel, allowing them to transform every which way along with every otherness. Things die, are born, go round, go square, and no one knows the root of it all. But it is spread out everywhere, and through it the ten thousand things have maintained themselves since time out of mind. Even something as vast as the six directions never gets beyond it; even something as small as a hair in autumn depends on it to take form as a physical body. Each thing in the world to the end of its days is forever rising and falling, never remaining as it was. The yin and the yang and the four seasons go through their cycles, each one finding its place in the sequence. Obscure, it is present, but only by being as if absent. Ever gliding away, it shows no fixed form, and thereby manifests its mysterious power. All things are nourished by it, but without ever knowing it. This is what is called the root and foundation, and it is with this that our gaze may reach the Heavenly.

Gnawgap asked Pajama about the Course.

Pajama said, “Align your body and unify your vision, and the Heavenly harmony will arrive. Gather your understanding[[9]](#footnote-9) in, unify your thoughts, and the imponderable spirit will come to reside in you. Your intrinsic virtuosities will beautify you, the Course will dwell in you. Just be oblivious to it all, like a newborn calf who seeks no reasons.”

But before he had even finished speaking, Gnawgap had fallen asleep. Pajama was delighted, and broke into song as he strolled away: “Body like withered bones, mind like dead ashes, his real understanding[[10]](#footnote-10) is genuine, using no precedents or purposes to maintain itself. Dim and obscure, free of intentions, unconsultable—what sort of person is this?”

Shun asked an assistant, “Can the Course be attained and possessed?”

He answered, “Even your body is not your own possession; how could you attain the Course?”

Shun said, “If my body is not my own possession, whose is it?”

“It is just a form lent by heaven and earth. Life is not your own possession; it is just a harmony lent by heaven and earth. Your inborn nature and allotment of life are not your own possessions, they are just a compliance lent by heaven and earth. Your sons and grandsons are not your own possessions; they are just sheddings lent by heaven and earth. So in all our travels we can never really know where we are going, in all our dwellings we can never really know what is maintaining us, in all our eating we can never really know what we are tasting. This is all the bright and vigorous energy of heaven and earth—how could it be obtained and possessed?”

Confucius said to Lao Dan, “You have some leisure today. I venture to ask about the perfect Course.”

Lao Dan said, “You must fast, rinse out your mind, cleanse the pure kernel of imponderable spirit in you until it gleams like snow, and smash your understanding[[11]](#footnote-11) to bits! Indeed, the Course is profound, difficult to describe! Nonetheless, I will tell you a few outlying generalities about it. The bright is born from the dark, and the determinable is born from the formless. The pure kernel of imponderable spirit in us is born from the Course. It is from this pure seminal kernel that the physical body is originally born. All things generate and give form to each other. Those with nine holes in them are born from a womb, those with eight are born from an egg. Before they come there is no trace of them and after they depart they are bound by no limits, traversing no gate and dwelling in no chamber,[[12]](#footnote-12) positioned only in the full-flung vastness of the four directions. He who accords with this is strong in body, unobstructed in thinking, keen of hearing and seeing; he makes no efforts in the use of his mind, responds to things with no fixed method. Heaven cannot help but be high, earth cannot help but be broad, the sun and moon cannot but proceed on their ways, all things cannot but arise and flourish—just this is their Course, is it not?

“Learning does not necessarily make one knowledgeable,[[13]](#footnote-13) and skill in debate does not necessarily make one wise. This is why the sage eliminates them. What he keeps, what keeps him,[[14]](#footnote-14) is only what is not increased or diminished however one tries to increase or diminish it. So deep and unfathomable—like the ocean! So lofty and towering—it ends and then begins again! To rearrange and measure out the ten thousand things so that nothing is lacking, such is your ‘course of the noble man.’ That is merely something external, is it not? But what the ten thousand things themselves all converge toward for support and can never lack—this is their own Course, is it not?

“These middle kingdoms are populated with ‘human beings,’ and such creatures are ultimately neither yin nor yang. For they dwell between heaven and earth only temporarily assuming the form of a human being, always just on the verge of returning to their source. From the point of view of its root, a living being is just a breath-filled bubble of gelatin. Although some are long lived and some die young, how much of a difference is there really? It’s all a matter of no more than a single instant—what room is there for the rightness of Yao and the wrongness of Jie? Every fruition, whether down on the ground or up in a tree, has its own coherence.[[15]](#footnote-15) Although humans encounter difficulties in their interactions with one another, this is precisely how they are able to interlock. The sage meets them without rebelling, lets them pass without holding on to them. To respond to them by adjusting and harmonizing with them is the work of the intrinsic powers, but to respond to them as a matter of pure happenstance is the work of the Course itself. This is what enables emperors to flourish and kings to arise.

“Man’s life between heaven and earth is like a white stallion galloping past a crack in a wall; just a sudden whoosh and then it is all over. Pouring and surging forth this way and that, everything emerges; slipping and sinking away, everything is submerged again. One transformation and you are alive, another and you’re dead. Living creatures lament it and human beings bemoan it. But this is just the unfastening of the Heavenly bow-sheath and the dropping away of the Heavenly scabbard, the twisting and turning in the chaos until all your yang and yin souls[[16]](#footnote-16) are ready to scatter away and then your body as well—hence, the Great Return!

“The formless takes on a form, the formed veers back to the formless; this is something everyone knows, and not something that needs to be accomplished by any work on the part of the one it’s about to happen to. It is something everyone has a theory about, but when it arrives there is no more theorizing. When there is theorizing, that just means it has not yet arrived. When it is seen clearly, that just means it has not really been encountered. So debate about it is no match for silence. The Course cannot be learned, so hearing about it is no match for plugging up your ears. This is called the Great Attainment.”

Master Eastwall asked Zhuangzi, “Where is this Course you speak of?”

Zhuangzi said, “There is nowhere it is not.”

“You must be more specific.”

“It is in the ants and crickets.”

“So low?”

“It is in the grasses and weeds.”

“Even lower?”

“It is in the tiles and shards.”

“So extreme?”

“It is in the piss and shit.”

Master Eastwall made no reply. Zhuangzi continued, “Truly, your question misses the substance of the matter. When a shopper asks a meat inspector to test how fat a hog is, the lower on the animal he checks, the more revealing the results. But if we just cease insisting on specifying one definite locus, it will flee no thing.[[17]](#footnote-17) That’s how the perfect Course is, and the same is true of great words. ‘The Ubiquitous,’ ‘The All-pervasive,’ ‘The Omnipresent’—these are three terms with the same meaning. They all point to the same thing. My words were just an attempt to set us wandering in the palace of not-even-anything, merging all together in these descriptions, everywhere inexhaustible! I was just trying to wander with you into non-doing![[18]](#footnote-18) How flavorless and placid it is! How deserted and transparent! How all-blending yet how in-between! Having diffused my will, I go nowhere in it, yet I never know where I will arrive, where it will arrive. Coming, going, yet never knowing where it will come to a stop, where I will come to a stop. And when I have already come and gone **[[AU: gone?OK]]** in it, I still never know where it has ended, where I have ended. Soaring through the vastness, a great knowing enters into it, into me, but without knowing where it comes to a halt.[[19]](#footnote-19)

“That which makes beings be, which separates beings into separate beings, is not separated from beings by any boundary. So the boundaries separating off the beings that the beings themselves take on—these are merely boundaries from the side of the beings. The boundaries that do no bounding, the boundlessness that nonetheless bounds—this is what fills and empties beings, what decays and kills them. That is filling and emptying but never filling or emptying; it is rotting and terminating but never rotting or terminating; it is rooting and branching but never rooting or branching; it is concealing and scattering but never congealing or scattering.”

Lovely Lotus Sweetie and Shennong[[20]](#footnote-20) were both students under Old Dragon Goodluck. Shennong had shut the door for an afternoon nap against his armrest when Lovely Lotus Sweetie came bursting in and said, “The Old Dragon is dead!” Shennong pulled himself up with his staff, and then clanging the staff down to the ground he laughed, and said, “The Heavenly One knew I was a vulgar, lazy fool, so he died and abandoned me. It is all over! The master died without even leaving some crazy words to set me off with!”

Lidcrock, having come to pay his respects, heard this and said, “All the noble men of the world seek to bind themselves closely to a man who has embodied the Course. Now what this one had attained of the Course was not even one ten-thousandth of an autumn hair, but even he knew enough to take his crazy words to the grave with him. How much more so one who has truly embodied the Course! Looking for it one finds no form, and listening one hears no sound. When people try to describe it they can only say it is a darkness, an obscurity. This is merely how the Course is described; it is not the Course itself.”

This is why, when Great Clarity asked Endless, “Do you know the Course?” Endless said, “I do not know.”

But when he asked the same question to Non-doing,[[21]](#footnote-21) he was told, “I know the Course.”

“Is your knowledge of the Course specifiable?”

“It is.”

“May I ask its specifications?”

“I know that the Course can be noble or can be base, can ennoble or can debase, can be bound or can be scattered, can bind or can scatter.[[22]](#footnote-22) These are the specifications by which I know the Course.”

Great Clarity reported this to Beginningless, saying, “So between Endless’s not knowing and Non-doing’s knowing, which is right and which is wrong?”

Beginningless said, “Not knowing is profound, knowing is shallow. Not knowing is internal, knowing is external.”

At this, Great Clarity was provoked to let out a sigh. “Not knowing is knowing! Knowing is not knowing! Who knows the knowing of non-knowing?”

Beginningless said, “The Course cannot be heard; whatever is heard is not it. The Course cannot be seen; whatever is seen is not it. The Course cannot be spoken; whatever is spoken is not it. Know that what forms forms has no form! The Course corresponds to no name.”

Beginningless also said, “If someone answers when asked about the Course, he does not know the Course. Though one may ask about the Course, this does not mean one has heard of the Course. The Course is not susceptible to questions, and any questions about it have no answers. To ask after it by asking no questions is to be through with all questions. To answer by giving no answers is to be free from harboring anything within.[[23]](#footnote-23) And to confront the ending of all questions with nothing harbored within—such a one externally sees no time and space and internally is without knowledge of any primordial beginning. So he never does any ‘passing beyond the Kundun mountains’ or ‘wandering in the great void.’”

Radiance asked Nothingness, “Do you exist or do you not exist?” He got no answer, and could see no countenance there, just a darkness, an emptiness. Ceaselessly gazing after him, listening for him, groping for him, he could find nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to take hold of. Radiance said, “This is truly reaching it! But who can reach this? Nothingness can be present to me, but never yet the lack of nothingness, for once I have come to it, it becomes the lack only of being—so how, from where, could I come to reach it?”

The Grand Marshal had in his employ an old man of eighty who was still forging harness buckles without the slightest error. The Grand Marshal asked him, “Are you just skillful, or do you have the Course?”

He said, “I have that which I hold to. Since the age of twenty I took delight only in making harness buckles. From then on I neglected all other things, noticing nothing besides harness buckles.”

Thus to make use of things depends on having no use for things, and thereby grows a grasp of their real use. How much more is this the case for that which makes use of all things! What being ever fails to find support in it?

Ran Qiu asked Confucius, “Can the state before there was Heaven and Earth be known?”

Confucius said, “Yes. The past is like the present.”

Ran Qiu could think of no more questions and withdrew, but he returned the next day and said, “Yesterday I asked you if the state before there was Heaven and Earth could be known, and you said it could, that the past was like the present. At the time this was crystal clear, but now it makes no sense to me. May I ask what this means?”

Confucius said, “Your clarity about it yesterday came from receiving it first with the imponderable spirit in you. Your present confusion is because you are now seeking it with something other than your imponderable spirit, is it not? No past, no present, no beginning, no end: before you have descendants you have descendants. Do you get it?”

Ran Qiu could not answer. Confucius continued, “It is enough that you cannot answer! It is not life that produces death, and it is not death that ends life. Do the endings and producings depend on something else then? All have to them that which unifies them as parts of a single body. But if there were something before Heaven and Earth, could it be any specifiable being? What makes beings beings is no being, for as soon as a being has appeared, it is no longer prior to all beings. It may seem as if there is something there, but what seems to be a something is only the endlessness. The endlessness of the sage’s love for others takes its cue from this.”

Yan Yuan asked Confucius, “I have heard you say, ‘Dismissing none, welcoming none.’ I venture to ask for more about how to wander so.”

Confucius said, “The men of olden times changed externally but not internally. Nowadays, people change internally but not externally. To transform along with things is the one way to be unchanging. Securely at peace in them whether they change or not, securely at peace even in dispersing and being dispersed by them, it finds its necessity in never exceeding them in the slightest. Mr. Hoghide[[24]](#footnote-24) wandered this way in his park, the Yellow Emperor in his garden, Mr. Youyu[[25]](#footnote-25) in his palace, and Emperors Tang and Wu merely in their own chambers. If even noble men like these, once they took Confucians and Mohists for their teachers, were made to grind away at each other with right and wrong, how much worse will be the men of the present age! The sage dwells among things without harming them. Because he doesn’t harm them, they cannot harm him either. Because there is no harm either way, he can both welcome them in and usher them out.

“The mountain forests, the great open plains! Shall they make me joyful, shall they fill me with happiness? But even before my joy is done, sorrow has come to take its place. When joy and sorrow come I cannot stop them from coming, and when they go I cannot keep them from going. How sad it is! The people of the world these days are nothing more than lodging houses for external things. They know all about what they encounter but not about what is never encountered. They know how to deftly deploy their abilities, but they don’t know how to deftly deploy their non-abilities. It is impossible to escape from non-knowing and non-ability! Is it not tragic to try to escape from what cannot be escaped? Perfect words eliminate all words. Perfect action eliminates all action. But merely to put what your knowing knows into some kind of order—that is just shallowness.”

1. 知 *Zhi*. Here personified as the questing hero of a kind of adventure story, and thus translated in this preposterous way, which echoes the facetious tone of the original. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A triple translation of 不知答 *buzhida.* See “Notes on the Translation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quoting *Daodejing* 56 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. *Daodejing* 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Daodejing* 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Qi*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 成理 *Cheng* *Li*. See Glossary for both *Cheng* and *Li*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 無為*Wuwei.* See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 知 *Zhi*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 知 *Zhi*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 知 *Zhi*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Chapter 4, p. XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 知 *Zhi*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I.e., what the sage keeps to and protects and what keeps and protects him. See Chapter 6, note J, and also Chapter 4, pp. XXX. Compare also *Daodejing* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 理 *Li*. See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Hunpo* 魂魄. At death the former are said to dissipate into the heavens and the latter into the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Following Qian Mu’s reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Or, following Cheng Xuanying’s reading, “These [three words] wander in the palace of not-even-anything, merging together into one single assertion which is nowhere brought to a halt! They have been doing nothing together, participating in each other’s non-doing!” Alternately, some take the passage as proposing the next step: “Let’s try wandering together in the palace of not-even-anything, merging together there for a discussion that is nowhere brought to a halt! Let’s try doing non-doing for each other, non-doing together!” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Double translations of all four of these assertions, to make explicit what I take to be the deliberate ambiguity of the original text concerning whether it is “I” or “my knowing” or “it” which is coming, going, ending, stopping. See “Notes on the Translation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “The Divine Farmer,” Legendary sage-king and inventor of agriculture. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Wuwei.* See Glossary. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Double translations. See “Notes on the Translation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Alternately, “To question what admits of no questions is to exhaust all questioning. To answer about what admits of no answers is to lose what is within.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Chapter 6, p. XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The sage-emperor Shun. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)