

Tao Te Ching - Chapter 38: A Decoded Translation

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Initial draft. To be progressively perfected as opportunities arise.

Sourced from the [“The Divine Revelation of the Tao Te Ching”](#) initiative, my translation of the *Tao Te Ching* differs fundamentally from others.

~65% of the English translation is AI-generated.

Tao Te Ching Version Quoted: Mawangdui Silk Texts

上德不德 是以有德 下德不失德 是以无德

A superior approach is not an approach anymore, thus the state of Te, the Tao-based paradigm, exists; an inferior approach does not lose its grip on being an approach, thus the state of Te, the Tao-based paradigm, does not exist.

In the context of the *Tao Te Ching*, Te (德) has two types of meaning:

- A method or approach in a general sense.
- The state in which a particular method conforms to the Tao-based paradigm.

上德无爲 而无以爲也 上仁爲之 而无以爲也 上義爲之 而有以爲也 上禮爲之 而莫之應也 則攘臂而扔之

A superior approach is not an approach anymore, thus the state of Te, the Tao-based paradigm, exists; an inferior approach does not lose its grip on being an approach, thus the state of Te, the Tao-based paradigm, does not exist.

德: A method that exists in the state of conforming to the Tao-based paradigm.

- As this term is used here in conjunction with “Superior” (上), it simultaneously carries its dual meanings (i.e., being both the method and the state of conformity).
- For more details, please refer to the last section.

以爲: Denotes purposefulness; to act with intention or for a specific end.

仁: A wide, outwardly-projected love, compassion, and affection.

義: Regulations (norms, restraints) imposed by one's inner consciousness.

禮: Regulations (norms, restraints) imposed by external forms and appearances.

應: Same meaning as in “不言而善應”.

攘臂:

- The other appearance is in “攘无臂”.

故失道而后德 失德而后仁 失仁而后義 失義而后禮 夫禮者 忠信之泊也 而亂之首也

Therefore, if one cannot follow (道) the Rule Space in the originating direction, one can only fall back on seeking (德) the methods that exist in the state of conforming to the Tao-based paradigm. If one cannot grasp (德) this type of methods, one can only fall back on seeking to possess (仁) outwardly-projected love, compassion, and affection. If one cannot possess (仁) outwardly-projected love, compassion, and affection, one can only fall back on seeking to

possess (義) regulations (norms, restraints) imposed by inner consciousness. If one cannot possess (義) regulations imposed by inner consciousness, one can only fall back on seeking to possess (禮) regulations (norms, restraints) imposed by external forms and appearances. As for (禮) regulations imposed by external forms and appearances, they are a shell of fidelity and trust, and the very beginning of chaos and inequilibrium.

前識者 道之華也 而愚之首也

Due to being based on external forms and appearances, (禮) regulations imposed by external forms and appearances are the easiest to recognize. It is the flower that blooms from the Tao: beautiful but ephemeral, a form without substance. Therefore, (禮) regulations imposed by external forms and appearances mark the beginning of ignorance and foolishness (a term implying it might also be the most profound form of ignorance and foolishness).

前: A position that is sequentially before others.

- This can be understood as "priority" or "precedence."
- Same meaning as in “故居前而民弗害也”.

識: To discern; to distinguish; to recognize.

- This is distinct from “知”, a character commonly used in the *Tao Te Ching*.
- If the meaning here were highly similar to “知”, why would the author not simply use “知”?

前識者:

- The preceding sections of the chapter establish a hierarchy in descending order of superiority:

道
德
仁
義
禮

- The difficulty of recognizing these concepts, however, is in the inverse order, from easiest to hardest:

禮
義
仁
德
道

- 禮: Recognition of external forms and appearances. Lowest difficulty.
- 義: Recognition of inner consciousness.
- 仁: Recognition of a widely projected quality.
- 德 and 道: The difficulty of recognizing these is self-evidently the highest.
- 前識: Those recognized first in the sequence of recognition. Because they have the lowest level of difficulty.

- Moreover, based on the context of the chapter: The preceding passage points its critique directly at “禮者”. The following passage uses this as a warning.
- “道之華也 而愚之首也” in this passage also refers to “禮者”.
- Therefore, “前識者” is a specific term for “禮者”.

華:

- Beautiful flowers. It implicitly suggests being generated from something more fundamental. It carries the sense of being ephemeral or not long-lasting, as flowers' blooms are very brief.
- It suggests being showy but without substance.
- It conveys a sense of emptiness and insubstantiality.
- This can be further understood from the character's usage in the following section.

首: “Head,” which by extension means “beginning” or “start.”

- It is the opposite of “尾”.
- It cannot be ruled out that it simultaneously holds the meaning of "the foremost," "the chief," or "the most extreme."

愚之首: This phrase therefore carries a dual meaning.

- The beginning of ignorance and foolishness.
- The most profound ignorance and foolishness.

是以大丈夫居丕厚而不居丕泊 居丕實而不居丕華 故去彼取此

Therefore, the great person of sharp discernment places himself in an environment where the foundation of fidelity and trust is dense and substantial, not in an environment where the foundation of fidelity and trust is scarce, or even missing; he places himself in an environment that has enduring and abundant support, not in an environment that is beautiful, ephemeral, and unsustainable. So, reject those and obtain these.

大丈夫: A person who does not follow the crowd (like water flowing downstream); who has vision, aspiration, determination, and capability; who takes action, is effective, and has perseverance.

- This is the sole instance in the *Tao Te Ching* where this designation is used.
- Why not “君子”? Because “君子” does not carry these specific connotations and refers to a different kind of person.
- Why not “圣人”? Because “圣人” does not carry these specific connotations and refers to a different kind of person.

“厚” and “泊” are a pair of contrasting concepts.

“實” and “華” are a pair of contrasting concepts.

- As the opposite of “實”, “華” carries the connotations of being “虛” and “无”.

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