



53. *Gradual Progress*

**Gradual progress is good when a woman marries.
It is beneficial to be correct.**

EXPLANATION

Gradual progress means going slowly, not rushing. As for the qualities of the hexagram, above is *wind* ☮, entering, and below is *mountain* ☷, still: Staying in the proper place and slowly entering, therefore it is called *gradual progress*.

This hexagram represents gradual practice following the appropriate order; it follows on the previous hexagram *thunder*. *Thunder* involves practicing introspection in action, not acting arbitrarily. Not acting arbitrarily, one is cautious and wary; strong energy resides within, the mind is firm and the will far-reaching—one can thereby practice the path of striving for the gold elixir.

The path of striving is the path of restoring the primordial while in the temporal; therefore it is returning the nonexistent to existence, so that what is gone comes back. To return the nonexistent to existence, so that what is gone comes back, is not something that can be done in one day; the process involved is subtle, the course of work is long—it is necessary to progress gradually, following the appropriate order, before one can reach deep attainment of self-realization.

The firmness of the hexagram stays still within, the flexibility follows without: Using flexibility with firmness, nurturing firmness by flexibility, solidity is used with openness, openness is practiced by solidity; firmness

and flexibility match, openness and solidity combine. This is like the yin and yang in the second and fifth lines corresponding; true yin and true yang naturally form a couple—this is not like trying to force the joining of false yin and false yang.

This path is like the way a woman marries. Usually when a woman marries a man, the man first seeks the woman, using an intermediary to communicate; if both families have no objection, then the woman marries into the man's family. Mutually attracted, the man and woman produce children, who produce grandchildren, and husband and wife grow old together. So what is good for a woman in marriage is good for the man. If the man does not seek the woman, and the woman seeks the man first, privately communicating without an intermediary, hastily seeking consummation, not only will the woman not be happy, neither will the man. Both the man and the woman will be unhappy, having merely attained a moment's pleasure, surely failing in the long run.

Therefore practitioners of Tao work gradually, not seeking quick success. Firmness used with flexibility is like the man seeking the woman. Not rushing yet not lagging, proceeding in an orderly fashion, more strongly as time goes by, is like communicating properly through an intermediary. When the work is done, it returns from effort to spontaneity; yin and yang join, firmness and flexibility merge, and a bead of spiritual elixir congeals from nothingness into form. This is like the woman marrying the man; man and woman espoused, they naturally give birth and rear offspring. Therefore the path of gradual cultivation is good when it is like a woman marrying.

However, though the gradual path is good, it is only beneficial if the gradual progress is correct. If it is not correct, it is not good. Among those in the world who practice material or sexual alchemy, those who cling to emptiness or stick to forms, there are those who do their practices all their lives without stopping—they are certainly proceeding gradually, but their gradual progress is not correct. So they waste their lives, growing old without achievement. What is the good of that? So it is necessary to proceed gradually in the correct manner, thoroughly investigating truth, completely realizing essence, to arrive at the meaning of life. From striving entering into nonstriving, from effort arriving at spontaneity, everyone can attain the great Tao.

- ***First yin:*** Geese gradually proceed on the shoreline. The small ones are in danger; there is criticism, no fault.

EXPLANATION

The very bottom of gradual progress is like geese gradually proceeding on the shoreline. Gradually proceeding on the shoreline, they lose the order they had in flight; carelessness in the beginning leads to misfortune in the end. When those who have gone wrong blame their errors on the alchemical classics, this is the small being in danger and there being criti-

cism. The danger of criticism is something they bring on themselves—it is no fault of others. This represents gradual progress that is weak and incorrect.

- **2 yin:** Geese gradually proceed on boulders; they eat and drink happily. Good fortune.

EXPLANATION

Being still and balanced is like geese gradually proceeding on boulders. Boulders are stable. But boulders are not the place for geese to stay: Gradually proceeding on a boulder, one refines the self until the proper time, emptying the mind so as to fill the belly; therefore one “eats and drinks happily.” There is enjoyment therein; it is obviously good fortune. This is gradual progress that is balanced in spite of weakness.

- **3 yang:** Geese gradually proceed on a plateau. The husband who goes on an expedition does not return; the wife who gets pregnant does not raise the child. Misfortune. It is beneficial to defend against brigands.

EXPLANATION

Strong without balance, progress going too high, is like geese proceeding on a plateau. A plateau is a mountain with a flat top: Proceeding on a plateau means losing the order of climbing from low to high. In a hurry to succeed, yin and yang are not in harmony; getting involved in artificiality, one damages the real. This is like the husband going on an expedition and not returning, falling in love with another woman, while the wife gets pregnant but does not raise the child, having a secret affair with a lover. This can lead only to misfortune. The misfortune comes about because in the use of strength it is important to stop in the proper place and defend against brigands, not to act arbitrarily and become a brigand oneself. This is gradual progress in which one is strong but loses control.

- **4 yin:** Geese gradually proceed in the trees, and may reach a level roost. No fault.

EXPLANATION

Remaining flexible by yielding is like geese gradually proceeding in the trees, possibly finding a level roost. Trees are not the place for geese to stay, but gradually getting to a level roost, they may rest there for a while. Similarly, becoming thoroughly empty and quiet, one thereby awaits the return of yang: Then naturally one does not commit the fault of missing it when it appears. This is gradual progress in which one is yielding and at the same time preserves correct orientation.

- **5 yang:** Geese gradually proceed onto a mountain top. The wife does not conceive for three years, but in the end nothing defeats her. Good fortune.

EXPLANATION

Positive strength correctly balanced is like geese proceeding onto a mountaintop. The mountaintop is high and is centered; as strength gradually proceeds to central balance, heat dissipates, and true yin and yang, essence and feeling, join together, no longer blocked by false yin and yang. This is like a wife not conceiving for three years but ultimately not being defeated. When the real returns and the false dissipates, the polar energies of true yin and yang join to form the elixir; then conception takes place where it hadn't before—that is to say, a bead of gold elixir is ingested into the belly. Then for the first time one knows one's destiny doesn't depend on heaven. What can compare to that fortune? This is gradual progress in which strength and flexibility merge.

- **Top yang:** Geese gradually proceed to level ground; their feathers can be used for ceremonies. Good fortune.

EXPLANATION

At the end of gradual progress, strength and flexibility are completely digested; having climbed from low to high, and gradually progressed to where no further progression is possible, the spiritual embryo is completely developed. This is like geese proceeding to level ground, resting in an even and safe place. Having progressed to peace and security, it is time to rest and stop work, to cultivate practices by which to contact and guide people who come to learn. This is why “the feathers can be used for ceremonies. Good fortune.” This is gradual progress culminating in complete fulfillment of the whole process from start to finish.

Each of the six lines involves the path of gradual progress, but the first one is too weak, and the third is too strong, so they are not favorable paths of progress. The other four all indicate achievements of gradual progress in appropriate order; sometimes yielding, sometimes firm, each carried out according to the time, the whole body and great function of gradual progress is finally revealed.



53. *Gradualness*

wood above,
mountain below

**There are trees on the mountain, growing gradually.
Thus do superior people abide in sagacity and improve
customs.**

Gradualness means going slowly. Above is *wood* ䷲, below is *mountain* ䷆; there are trees on the mountain. Trees on a mountain will grow

great and tall; but great and tall trees do not reach their full growth in a day and a night. This is the image of *gradualness*.

What superior people see in this is that virtue is the root of human beings, goodness is the most precious treasure of human beings; if they cannot maintain their virtue, they are not sagacious, and if they cannot transform their temperament, their goodness will not be great. Therefore they emulate the stability of a mountain in abiding immutably in sagacity, and emulate the gradual growth of trees, not rushing or lagging, gradually sublimating the force of customary mundanity so as to return to ultimate goodness.

Sagacity is the fundamental nature of ultimate goodness; custom is the mundane force of accumulated influences. Custom here does not mean only people's customs in the usual sense, but includes all mundane feelings and desires, including greed, anger, and folly. When one abides in sagacity and applies it to daily affairs, one is sagacious in everything and virtuous in every situation. Abiding in sagacity, the person becomes one with the virtue of sagacity, and so rests immutable and unwavering in ultimate good. When the character is good, all the accumulated influences of mundane feelings gradually disappear, turning into true sense, without hypocrisy or deceit, so that customs return to goodness.

Once the real is restored, the false evaporates of itself. The real is thus within the false, and the false is not outside the real. With sagacity, customs must improve, as a matter of course. The reason gradualness is applied in both abiding in virtue and improving customs is that since the human mentality has been in charge of affairs for so long, the mind of Tao is not apparent; even though one abide in virtue, one cannot immediately do so securely, and even though one improve customs, one cannot immediately do so completely.

When abiding in virtue is insecure, this is not called sagacity; when improvement of customs is incomplete, this is not called customary goodness. Abiding in the virtue of sagacity must reach the point where one is sagacious in all respects; only then is the abiding secure. Improvement of customs must reach the point where all customs are good; only then is improvement complete.

When one's character is sagacious and one's customs are good, the primal is complete and the secondary sublimates; there is only goodness, nothing else. Returning to pristine purity, steady as a mountain, upstanding as a tree, the business of doing is completed and the business of nondoing comes to the fore. From now on one practices in a different mode, using the natural fire of reality to incubate the spiritual embryo, whereby it is possible to enter the realm of unfathomability of spiritual transformation.