

Tao Te Ching Chapter Forty Seven

by Lao Tsu

不窺於牖以見天道

其出彌遠其知彌少

是以聖人弗行而知弗見而名弗為而成

The beginnings of the first two lines are can be rendered as ‘not going out of the door’ and ‘not peering out of the window’. According to the old texts and commentaries, ‘doors’ and ‘windows’ are commonly used to refer to the ‘apertures’ of the sense organs. So these first lines imply that the mind has the ability to not leave the body and its energy, whereby it might get lost in the world. This also links to the similar usage of ‘doors’ and ‘windows’ discussed in Chapters 52 and 56, which Feng translates as ‘senses’ and ‘mouth’ respectively.

The literal translation of the phrase that Feng renders as “the whole world” is ‘all under heaven’. ‘Celestial paths’ is the literal meaning translated by Feng as “the ways of heaven”; it is a reference to the underlying order of space and time. This was understood, over hundreds, if not thousands, of years, by observing the night sky and the procession of the planets and constellations around the pole star, and in turn the ‘empty space’ at the actual northern celestial pole.

“The further you go the less you know” is about recognizing that the centre of all ‘knowing’ is within the self, and a warning not to centre one’s knowledge outside too much. It is also a warning about getting lost in the desire for rare, distant and valuable external things to the detriment of one’s body and mind; to not give up the near for the far.

The last line can be rendered: ‘Thus the Sage doesn’t move, yet knows; doesn’t see, yet names; doesn’t act, yet accomplishes’.