

# THE SIMPLE WAY

A Daoist Response to Life

Eight Talks by Xudanzi  
(Master of the Empty Boat)



Transcribed and with  
an Introduction and Afterword by  
SCOTT P. BRADLEY

*This book presents a personal philosophy of life inspired by the 4th Century BCE Daoist Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu). A fictional sage shares his philosophy in a series of impromptu lectures.*

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## A FOREWARD BY XUDANZI

The doctor tells me I will soon be dead. I ask how I could “be” dead, but she has no time for philosophical questions within the confines of my fifteen minute allotment. That’s just as well; no amount of inquiry will solve the mystery of death in any case.

My friend Scott has asked my permission to transcribe and publish some talks I recently gave, and I must decide whether I wish to leave behind something of my dao, though it can only be a dead dao since its creator will also soon “be” dead. A dao is a living thing when it arises out of the process of a life being lived. Yet the world is full of dead daos though their adherents are very much alive. An adopted dao is someone else’s dao and can only be genetically inferior and soon to die. For what is a dao if not the process of an individual navigating her-, him-, or their-self through the bewildering experience of self-aware existence? The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi tells us that a dao is made by walking it. And in the book that bears his name we are told the story of a young man who heard of a barbarian tribe that had a special way of walking. Thinking this might be the best way for *him* to walk he went to join them so as to learn their special way of walking. But it was not his own natural walk, and he could not master it. After many years of failure, he decided to return home. Only now he had forgotten his own native way of walking and could only crawl home. I do not wish to cripple you.

Yet, I have just now made reference to the dao of Zhuangzi and one of his interpreters. For my dao, like every living dao, though uniquely my own, has not arisen outside the context of the daos of others. Our daos arise out of our own unique

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experience, but they are built with the help of those who have gone before us. Can I leave you a few scraps of my dao that might help you build your own? Only if you are able to “forget” them even as you use them—or forget them without using them at all. I must trust you in this.

As one about to die I must also ask why I would wish to leave anything behind besides the unavoidable pile of ashes and a few rapidly fading memories, soon to follow me into apparent extinction. In the face of eternity nothing lasts for long. Every “legacy” is just a fool’s hope. Seen in “the broad daylight of Heaven” nothing really matters all that much. Every momentous event, all we take as the most precious, will all come out in the final rinse. But, of course, things do matter for we who live and we have every reason to engage with them as meaningful. This is what life does. Only we needn’t cling to anything as to an eternal verity.

So as one still alive, I will permit Scott to share my dao, thinking it might inspire others in the process of walking their own. And I will hope my legacy will be to have been helpful though utterly forgotten.

## INTRODUCTION

Let's begin with some clarity, though not so much as to obscure the value of ambiguity. Xudanzi is a pseudonym for someone no longer in this world. And it is I, not he, who has given him this name. And though I am quite sure that he would approve of his being given a pseudonym, this is certainly not the one he would have chosen for himself since to do so would have been blatantly self-aggrandizing. It is a Chinese name, borrowed from one bestowed upon a 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century spiritual teacher, Wang Xuan, by one of his students. The author of these talks was a Western European and he would have seen no need to suggest otherwise. I have done so playfully and because it is likely to attract more immediate attention than if I had named him John Doe. If this has helped to net your interest, and that now disturbs you, I would suggest you would be better off examining why that is so rather than in focusing on the net. Translated into English the name means "Master of the Empty Boat". Again, he would never have assumed such a name as this. But I, his admirer, believe it suits him well.

The trope of "the empty boat" comes from the *Zhuangzi*, an ancient anthology of essays written by Chinese philosophers of mostly "Daoist" persuasion. If, as widely believed, the philosopher Zhuangzi (ca. 369-286 B.C.E.) was the author of the first seven chapters (called the Inner Chapters) of this book, then beginning with him, its total of thirty-three essays probably represent the evolution of thought over as much as two hundred years. Xudanzi makes extensive use of Zhuangzi's philosophy and the reader is encouraged to explore his thought directly should these talks arouse her or his interest. In these talks Xudanzi frequently quotes Zhuangzi and these, for the most

part, are taken from Brook Ziporyn's *Zhuangzi: The Essential Chapters* and this translation is the one I believe he would most recommend. The story of the empty boat is found in Chapter 20 of the *Zhuangzi* and bears repeating here.

If you were crossing a river in your skiff and you saw someone in another boat bearing down on you, you would likely shout a warning. If the other boat did not change course after several shouts, but remained on a collision course, you would likely shout even louder and might even resort to profanity. You would be justifiably angry at the other fellow. But what if, asks the raconteur, that other boat was empty? Well, there would be no one to blame and no shouting and cursing. And here in the story we get a very Zhuangzian twist: *Be like that empty boat*. If your boat is empty, if you are not ruled by your ego and don't impose yourself on others, don't displace other egos with your own, who will oppose you? There will be nothing in you to oppose, nothing upon which to push back. Zhuangzi himself summed up his own dao along similar lines: "It's just being empty, nothing more."

I have called the author of these talks Master of the Empty Boat not simply because he espoused a similar dao, but because he in many ways embodied it. This is not intended to suggest that he was an august sage or a fully realized guru—he was not. He was just a very, very pleasant man to be around, someone who drew you into your own pleasure, not into his. He seemed to create the occasion, the space, for you to enjoy being yourself. And that, of course, is the essence of the Daoist vision of sagacity.

The title of this book, however, is not of my own making. Xudanzi spoke of his dao as The Simple Way. Since he discusses it at length in these talks, there is no need for me to explain it at any length here. It will suffice to share the kernel at



the very heart of that way: You are perfect by virtue of your being perfectly who you are, just as you are. The power of this realization cannot be expressed in words. That is the case, at least, when it is actually experienced, and not simply understood. In the end, Xudanzi is inviting us to an experience that can be described as mystical. It is mystical in that it calls for a movement outside our reasoning minds, and because it is a deeply transformative. But it is not mystical in the sense that mysticism is usually understood. Typically, mysticism presupposes some form of speculative metaphysics; something is there to be united with, whether it be God, Universal Self, Dao, or any other of a number of imagined ultimate realities. But Xudanzi's mysticism, following Zhuangzi, is innocent of all speculative metaphysics. Perhaps we could call it auto-mysticism. It is auto-transformation, a kind of psychological experience facilitated by the realization of a new perspective without reference to anything conceived as outside oneself. But it is also a transformation with reference to the unknowable Mystery of our inescapable context. It is precisely the absence of anything identifiable in that context that facilitates the transformative experience which Xudanzi describes as Openness. Openness is release into nothing identifiable; it is an open-ended release into emptiness which becomes itself a kind of emptiness. But it is an emptiness also populated with an infinity of things. Nothing is negated; all is affirmed.

These eight talks were delivered within the last year. Their locality is of no significance. The audience gathered in response to a few fliers inviting anyone interested to free lectures on the subject of a Daoist response to life. It began with only a handful for the first talk and grew to several scores by the final talk. They were Xudanzi's first and last such talks and were only given in view of his recent discovery that he was not long for

this world. I asked his permission to record, transcribe and share them, and this book is the fulfilment of that enterprise. Just before his passing, he provided a brief statement concerning his motivation in allowing the publication of his dao. This may very well be the most significant part of the entire book. I have included it as a foreword to this work.

Since these talks were given without notes as a kind of spontaneous sharing, they are not always tightly structured or grammatically precise. I have rounded off some of the sharper corners, but for the most part I have left them in their free-wheeling, conversational style. I have also omitted the opening and closing pleasantries that accompanied each talk.

It only remains to echo Xudanzi to the effect that the virtue of this book, should there be any, resides primarily in the possibility that it might stimulate others to “evolve along their own daos”, as Zhuangzi suggests we do. It would grieve Xudanzi most if anything he says here were taken as a dao to adopt and follow. Every human experience is unique, and although there are indeed a myriad of contextual givens common to us all, how we respond to them must remain uniquely our own if our paths are to be authentic.

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