

The Art of Being Useless

LIVING AND LOVING THE IDLE LIFE



translated from German by Fergus Kelleher

Jupp Hartmann

This is an account of the author's philosophical leanings toward the Dao and how he got there. Read how he 'unwires' himself from the patterns common to different mind-sets while painting, dancing, teaching and 'idling' around the world.

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By Jupp Hartmann

Translated from German by Fergus Kelleher

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*Contradiction
beyond count,
is wealth,
beyond doubt.*

(Zhuangzi, XII, 2)

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Part 1

Shadows of the Past

The Old Pear Tree

In my parents' garden stood a mighty pear tree. Its growth was wondrous, though its fruit were small and woody. Had they been softer and sweeter my father might have lived a few more years. As it was, one died less than a couple of days of the other. The tree first, then my father.

Behind our house was a lot of space. The old man would not have been able to work on the entire garden. There was no reason to fell the tree, except for the fact that it had no use. So, my father, one day, took out his axe and saw, cut down the trunk and the branches, and stacked them carefully in the corner of the yard. The tree's stump jutted out of the ground. It didn't look right. The roots had to be dug out. The tree gripped on hard, but, in the end, my father won out. He filled the hole, finally, with earth, flattened the ground, and went to bed, exhausted but satisfied. He got up early the next morning. As he was used to. Shortly afterwards he fell over and was dead.

He knew that this could happen. Heavy work could put his life in danger. He had only just come out of the hospital after a third heart attack. As the doctors had expressly stated he was supposed to take it easy.

But work was his life. Even as a child. He had to help his father on the building site, carrying stones. He learned to be a builder,

acquired a Master's certificate, eventually running his own company. Tired from working on the site, he would still sit for hours in the evenings in his office, doing his accounts or brooding over estimated costs for new orders.

Despite his efforts things grew worse. The time for companies with four or five employees had gone. By working hard, he kept his head above water for a few more years. Then his heart wouldn't play along any more. It forced him to slow down. He lost control of the business. The workers began to slack off. Deadlines weren't met. He had to let the company go.

There was always more work to do though. My sister and brother both got engaged. The young families each needed a home to live in. So my father had two more houses to build.

But these also came to an end. What was he supposed to do? Sit around the whole day – being useless? Luckily, the garden was still there. There was more to do there than a little weeding and watering flowers – and my father knew how to work.

So the old, useless pear tree came to him, at the right time.

Names and their Magic

I grew up on the border between Germany and France. At that time there was still border control, though it wasn't as strict as it used to be. The barriers mostly pointed upward. In the little customs house on the French side, an old man used to sit, dozing the whole day long, looking up quickly only to wave cars through, as if shooing away a fly that had disturbed his rest.

This was the border that had so bitterly been fought over in the time of my grandparents. Once I was in Verdun. I saw the slaughter fields of the First World War. In some places the bayonets of men who had been buried alive were still jutting out. Hundreds of thousands of young men were driven to their deaths here, just to move the border a couple of metres back and forth.

Often after church on Sundays we would take a family trip somewhere, on occasion over the border. I was always astonished by how different the villages on both sides were. On the German side were a lot of new houses. Older houses were mostly renovated, painted and spruced up. The streets were in good condition and a lot of asphalt footpaths laid down. On the other side were a lot of potholes, muddy paths when it rained, and houses that displayed their age. Even the graveyards there were different, the gates rusty, and in the wind the crosses were tossed in all directions.

Judging from the level of prosperity those who lost the wars were doing better than the winners. In spite of this a magic of its own came from the villages on the other side. The older buildings allowed something from an older world shine through arousing curiosity in it. On our side an immense effort had cleansed the villages of any trace of the past. A sterile present had been left in its place.

Idleness, as I had often heard is the root of all evil. Real men did real work. Rolling up sleeves, getting stuck in, getting the economy into gear, banishing all dark thoughts of the past. Hard work, organisation, punctuality. These were the virtues that

constituted the perfect citizen. Questioning this wasn't the done thing.

The spectres of the past, though, found their way around. It was the custom to honour the dead by baptising the new born with their names. My elder brother got his name from the younger brother of my mother, the most beloved only son of my grandmother. He came home mortally ill from the Russian front and died, shortly after the war at the age of 26. My brother became my grandmother's substitute son.

I also received a dead relative's name, my father's brother who fell in the Western Front. That's how my generation was woven through a magic of its own into the horrors of the past.

Once we went to Normandy. We asked the way to a place my father had to find. There was a soldiers' graveyard here, where an endless amount of white stone crosses stood in rank and file. The only way of telling one from the other was through the names engraved on them. Here were the names of German soldiers who in the Second World War had been driven to their death, to delay the collapse of the regime for a few more days. Finally, we found my uncle's grave. There I stood, in front of a gravestone, my own name on it.

The Way of the Robber

The philosopher Zhuangzi lived 2300 years ago in China. From him and his students comes a book in which can be found numerous small stories such as the following:

The robber Zhi's companions once asked him:

"Is there a right path for a robber to follow?"

He answered them: "Of course! How could he get by without following it?"

He must sense where something is hidden: that is mindfulness.

He'll be the first to go in: that's courage.

The last to go out: zealotry.

He must know what can and cannot be done: wisdom.

He's got to divide the treasure well: justice.

For someone lacking even one of these values, becoming a great robber, has not yet been seen to happen under Heaven."

This means that not only good people are guided by the right way, shown by the holy ones. The robber Zhi also has to know this. Otherwise he won't get far. But now the good in the world are few and the bad many. For that reason, the saints' benefit for the world is low, but their destructive impact large.

(Zhuangzi, X, 2)

Quarrels

My father had also been a soldier in the Second World War. He was a motorbike courier for an anti-aircraft unit, because of which he was not directly involved in combat. Luckily for him, as he often said, he never had to shoot anyone.

Despite this when in the Wehrmacht, he gave his very best: that was Discipline. His oath as a soldier was sacred to him: that was Sincerity. His superiors knew that they could trust him: that was Reliability. As far as he was concerned, Hitler was a liar. Yet he served him obediently: that was Loyalty. A principled man, my father was always resolved to follow the right way, as should I.

But it didn't work like that. I grew up in the time of the great youth protests. The values of the war generation came up against strong resistance. "There is no good life to be had in a false setting." – a statement attributed to Adorno – and something with which I agreed.

"What should we have done?" my father would respond to my reproaches.

"Had you lived then, you wouldn't have done a thing different."

My mother would then bring out her favourite saying: "Do as the people do so as to be safe in their midst."

My parents were convinced that they had acted rationally. If that was the case, then I did not want to accept this rationale.

To protect oneself against thieves who break open crates, search through bags, tear open cases, by wrapping ropes and cords around them, by tightening bolts and locks - that is what the world calls intelligence. But when a great thief comes along, he takes the crate on his back, the case under his arm, the bag over his shoulder and runs away, only worried that the ropes and locks will hold on. Therefore, someone whom the world

calls a clever man does nothing more than hold his stuff together for the great thieves. That's why we want to talk about it some more. Among those whom the world calls clever people, is there a single one who does not keep his things together for the great thieves? Among those whom the world calls saints, is there one who does not stand guard for the great thieves? (Zhuangzi, X,1)

Entanglement

Unlike many in their generation my parents didn't pretend they were unaware of what had happened. As a young woman my mother had worked in an institution for the mentally unwell. Shortly before getting married she quit. Later on an old work colleague told her that former patients of hers had been deported and murdered.

Once, passing a clothing business in the next town my mother said "There were Jews here in the past." Her voice grew quiet, "Later they were all taken away".

My father was a member of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party), even before the Nazis came to power. He was even in the SA (Sturmabteilung – Storm Detachment). He came from Lower Franconia, but when a builder he moved to the Saar region to help construct the Westwall, a chain of bunkers. While they were there laying down a foundation one of Hitler's speeches came on the radio, in which already the completion of that project was being celebrated. From this moment on he saw Hitler as a fraud. For my father there was no

excuse for lies. With the building of the wall, however, as with the preparation for war, he was there with his usual devotion.

The assistant worker, he had then, Willy, stayed throughout his life with my father. He didn't only help with building but also worked in our garden, and when we were redecorating, Willy was the one on the ladder. Willy could do many things: plant beanstalks, use a scythe, build rabbit hutches, repair bicycles. Everything he did, though, he did exceptionally slowly. He knew no haste. When he had money, he went into the pub in the evenings and drank himself into a stupor. My father paid him pocket money only, and my grandmother gave him cigarettes, and cooked for him. In the Winter he refused to get out of bed. His relatives would take care of him, and we wouldn't see him for a few months. Willy was a kind hearted man. I never knew him to be angry. He radiated a kind of peace and led a carefree life. The Nazis regarded him as not being normal enough. They forcibly sterilised him, and almost had him killed had my father not fiercely stood up for him. He insisted that he needed Willy as a handyman, until the officials of the relevant department finally gave in. He was, after all, a diligent and reliable man and above all a years-long party member.

The God of the Cows

If horses and cows could draw, then horses would draw horse-like images of the gods and cows would draw cow-like images, said the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes. The Nubian Gods would be dark with short noses. The Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.

People tend to portray their Gods according to their own image. When people, who are friendly and full of life are religious, then they believe in a kind, loving God, while the God of upright people is a rigid one, and of violent folk a vicious one.

A lot of the brutalisation and trauma of the Second World War could still be felt when I was young. The God I was made to have faith in was a fearsome God. Religion, as I'd gotten to know it, was full of cruelty.

There wasn't only the detailed description of hell, but the stories around the lives of the saints were full of terror. The pastor in religion class would describe in great detail the torture the Christian martyrs had to endure, and the holy figures in the church held the instruments in their hands by which they had been killed. The guardian saint of our village, Saint Katherine, had been broken on a wheel. In the parish church she was displayed with a wheel, out of which stuck long pointed spikes. The saint presiding over the neighbouring village, St. Mauritius, had been killed, as was plain to see, by a sword.

The earth, a veritable vale of tears. For hundreds of years the church, had, in this way, glorified pain, suffering and death. Faith and War mutually nourished each other. A church-military alliance that held life itself in contempt.

Changing Times

There were often terrible rows between my grandmother, mother and my sister 14 years older than me. Mostly it had to do with suitable marriage candidates for my sister. My mother would ardently express her preferences and dislikes. Ultimately she was the one who decided on all things related to the home.

She herself hadn't chosen her own husband. She had been in love with someone else. But one day a neighbour as matchmaker turned up, and proposed my father as a son-in-law. He was exactly to my grandmother's liking.

My mother finally gave into the will of her mother, and now, as her daughter was of marriageable age, saw it as her right to be involved in choosing the future groom.

My father was involved in the background. He enquired from the local dignitaries of the surrounding villages about the families of the candidates. His daughter's husband should come from respectable roots.

The older people made the decisions, the young had to do as they were told. That had already been made clear to us. In the village school the teacher regularly beat the children with a stick. Each parent knew but didn't do anything against it. That was how things were.

It was no wonder the youth rebelled more and more against these circumstances. Even with their music. Just like the Beatles, who were then enjoying their huge success, more and more young men let their hair grow long. That was provocation

enough to arouse the anger of our elders. Men's hair had to be very neat and short. A long-haired man was regarded as a waster, and was under the suspicion of being work-shy. I often heard adults at the sight of a guy with long hair hiss: 'He should be locked up' or 'That wouldn't have happened under Hitler'.

The anger directed towards the young who were looking to make their own way, engendered in reverse our rage. The emotions of the two generations heaved heavily one against the other. The pig-headedness of the old was the object of our outrage, as well as their legacy to us.

Revolt

I didn't believe my parents. You didn't have to do what everyone else did. For that I found living proof: the communists. I got to know old resistance fighters. Some had been shut inside concentration camps. Others managed to make it into exile. A few remained undetected. Their party, as I came to realise, was the only political power, that had organised itself from the start to fight back. There I found the steadfast spirit that was missing in my home. They were my heroes, the idols of my youth, my substitute family.

My parents were appalled to find out that I had become a communist. The more they tried to discourage me, the more I had to defend and justify myself, and consequently the greater the reinforcement I sought from my comrades.

Soon I had to quit my school as I had completely neglected my studies because of politics. My parents in desperation sought

out other prospects. Eventually my father dragged me along to our Mayor, with whom he sat on the community council, my father for the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Mayor for the Social Democrats (SPD). At the same time, he was the Labour Director of the nearby steel mill. He could get me a job there. From the beginning of the next year I would do an apprenticeship, while at the same time attending Technical College. But I had to promise that I would not engage in politics at work.

I promised, under pressure from my father, to stick to the conditions. Afterwards I felt like a traitor. To deliver myself of this sin, I would stick to and act on my political convictions even more for the future – as well at work. I went to the Technical College only for a month or two and then had to leave because of ‘challenging the content of the course’ and ‘rebellious behaviour’.

On the Other Side of the Factory Gate

Getting to know the world of work was an adventure. As a convinced communist I was certain that the workers were the future. To become one, was not a step down, in my view. As a student I often gave out leaflets with my comrades at the factory gate when the shifts would change. Once a worker, with a dismissive gesture, refused a leaflet, shouting – ‘Why don’t you instead come in?’ – as much to say – ‘what do you know about work?’ From such a point on, whenever I would speak about exploitation and Capitalism no-one would be able to say I had no idea of what I was talking about.

I began in Electrical installation. There I became acquainted with hard graft. High voltage wire often had to be hauled through a cable shaft. The underground shafts were full of dirt and so narrow, that it was only possible to crawl into them. If there was a turn in the shaft, someone – often me – had to do that, and make sure that the cable didn't get stuck when pulled it.

But there were also easy times. I could accompany a colleague who was responsible for changing fluorescent lamps and light bulbs. He always knew where to find a beer and where to drink it without being disturbed.

A lot of my colleagues always found time for private work. They particularly enjoyed putting together grill-racks for barbecues. Some didn't only construct them for themselves but also for neighbours and relatives. Smuggling them outside wasn't an issue. The workers were able to drive their cars onto the worksite. There was almost no check at the gate, and if in doubt, people knew when a security man from their own village was on gate duty.

Not everything went exactly by the book. Alcohol naturally was forbidden, but there were beer-peddlers all over the plant. These were usually the maintenance people, who kept the recreation rooms tidy. The man in charge of our line, sold homemade Schnapps, but not to his own workers. If one of us had a birthday, then we'd send the lathe-operator from a neighbouring department to get a bottle from him.

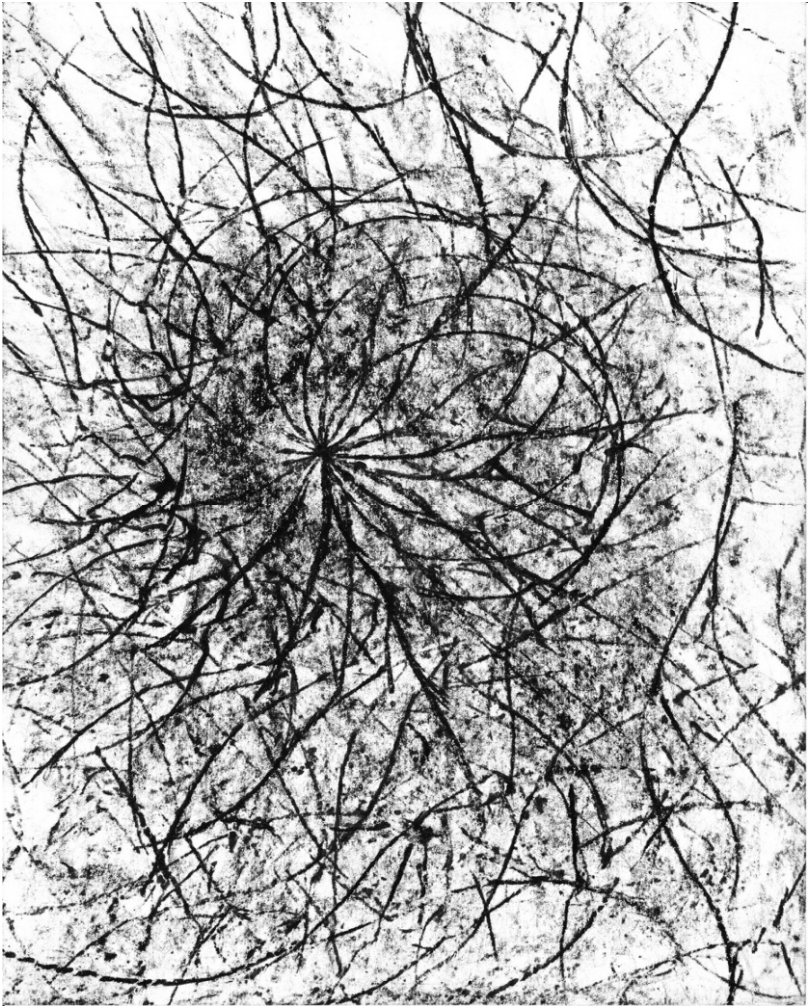
My colleagues felt themselves very much a part of the Steel Works. If there was a technical problem, then they tried hard to figure out a solution. They were proud of their capability and ability to improvise. Whenever we didn't have a required part in storage, we would go through all units no longer in use to see if we could find that part anywhere and take it out.

Most of the steelworkers came from the surrounding villages and the atmosphere at work had something of the village about it. And just like in a village there were the types about whom numerous anecdotes were told. And, just as the atmosphere used to be in the fields, people worked hard, but not in a hectic way. That was the tempo of work in our department, going from intense, and often dangerous to laidback.

Our crew serviced the entire plant. In the steelworks I could watch as liquid steel in a giant swell, gushed out of the convertor, a great swivelling cauldron. Or in the rowing mill where thick, bright glowing steel slabs were pulled in with tremendous force and spat out as centimetre thin sheets. A sublime sight that would put me in a solemn mood. Man controlling the forces of nature. It was an apt setting for the myth of the revolutionary steelworker which the communist party espoused. And I was a part of it.

I was an assistant for half a year in the electrical installation unit. After that I worked as an apprentice in the various departments which belonged to the Steel Mill. I had to go for two days in the week to school. After I was thrown out of there my apprenticeship also automatically came to an end. I had to find new work.

The Art of Being Useless



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Modern Times

The car factory, where I had now begun, was only a few kilometres away from my previous job. Yet a completely other world. There was nothing to marvel at here nor any laidback way of working. Being effective and performing to the utmost was the order of the day. In the first couple of months I worked on the final assembly line. I built in a triangular window and a handle at the front right hand side of almost five hundred cars per day. I had to work on the rubber seals of the triangular window with a soapy solution, so that the glass could slide in quicker. At the end I had to tap in the rubber seal.

One day a solution sprayed into my eye. I made my way instantly to the company doctor. Fully focussing on my eye I stopped. A suit came towards me shouting: ‘Hey, hurry up, this is not the place to loiter about.’

After some time, I was put into another department. Steel sheets were welded here to the bodies of the cars. I had to take the sheets from one wagon, work on them and hoist them up to another wagon. They had sharp edges and, every now and again, even with work gloves, there were injuries. Once I cut myself right to the bone. My finger had to be stitched up. I had a doctor’s note for two weeks, but not without the warning that I should stay at home for three days only, and then register myself with the *Wiederherstellungsabteilung* – the Rehabilitation Department.

Even though the name might suggest rehabilitation the Department didn’t concern itself with the physical well-being

of the company's personnel. It was there for only one reason: the company was insured for accidents at work, with an employer's liability insurance, where the contribution rate was measured according to the number of official accidents reported. Accidents with an out-of-work time of more than three days qualified as such. If someone, despite being written up with a sick note, appeared at work of his own accord, within that time period, then the company saved on those costs. In the Rehabilitation Department there was light work for everybody. Even a person who could only fill screws into a little bag with one hand, found himself a place here.

Before, when I had been injured I spent a few days there. This time I was reluctant to do this. I didn't want to dress up the company's contributions for accidents statistics. For as long as I had a sick note I stayed home. When I came back to work, I was sent to another department. Work was harder there.

The Reel of Language

Somehow my body by itself performed its routine work manoeuvres, leaving my mind free for other things. I had to keep my mind occupied to drive away the boredom. To myself I started to recite poetry: Brecht and Heine, Communist Agitprop and the poets of the 1848 revolution, whose passion for freedom drowned out the industrial cacophony around me. More than the meaning of the words, the musical quality of the language kept me going through the many monotonous hours. I discovered how it was to become inebriated by language. Dead-eyed work enabled me to glimpse ecstasy.

Master Dongguozi questioned the Zhuangzi and said,

"Where is what you call the Dao?"

Zhuangzi said, "Everywhere."

Dongguozi said: "You must define it more precisely."

"It's in that ant."

"Where else?"

"It's in these weeds."

"Give me a simpler example."

"It's in this clay brick."

"Even simpler?"

"It is in this lump of shit."

Master Dongguozi fell silent.

(Zhuangzi, XXII, 5)

Usefulness Denied

In the car factory I was a Shop Steward. My comrades were proud of me. They needed someone like me, who was an active representative of the workers in the company. But after some time it was clear to me that I didn't want to spend my entire life putting cars together. After five years there I made the decision, to go back to school, and finish my Finals.

I thought that would be in line with the Party. Didn't they struggle for the greater education of the Worker? The all-round developed socialist personality, who knows his way as much around the work bench as the finest literature - wasn't that the dream?

Naively, I told my comrades of my decision, certain they would be enthusiastic. But they weren't. When representing the workers, I was more useful.

Shortly afterward I went as a delegate to a Party Congress. During the breaks some of the functionaries tried to change my mind. They went on and on, deriding me as a traitor to the cause of the workers. At the end of one break I couldn't bear to go back into the assembly. I sat on the steps and cried. A delegate from my district arriving late hurried past me without saying a word.

I stuck to my decision. One of the colleagues from my workshop, who I'd been on good terms with, never spoke to me after that.

That was the first gash in my communist world view. How could it be that in a party where the welfare of humanity was the goal, the well-being of the individual counted for so little?

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Part 5

The Abundance of a Moment

The Magician

Among the tarot cards is one which at the time especially spoke to me. It's called the magician and shows a man who, with one hand holds up a wand, while with the other points downwards. This is how he channels power from the sky to the earth. He opens himself to a force which goes beyond what he is able to do, and lets it manifest itself through him. He doesn't push it out of himself but turns himself into a medium for something bigger which flows through him. He is simply an empty vessel and through him it can do its work. That's what I wanted to try out. Not to plan, but rather to let happen. To wait for things to make their own sense.

The weight of the signposts, their traces in the air are not for stray dogs with big eyes. Where the almond trees submit to the summer, the shade is only a matter of newspapers. The dawn's shoes tripped over the bed, the last of the Hun ride into the dust of noon. The throats of songbirds rise from a crater far from the city. Between steps of stones, olive trees are thrown.

It was an important moment for our town, when after long efforts the last passengers were soldered onto the plate, so that double the amount of circuits were possible, like this place, first made honorary reference to in the 1700s, opened from the first mayors to the undersecretariat as well as 5 to 4 in key positions.

Écriture automatique (automatic writing) is a technique popular with the surrealists. Someone writes down whatever words come into their mind not caring for context, what is meant to be correct, or how it is to be understood. One gives up control and lets the text just run. Later on someone can try to interpret the words as emissaries from the unconscious or whatever. A fun game? Or something more? That's what I wanted to find out.

We know still too little about the ring snakes drift. A leaf lolls on the hooks and eyelets of the trees until it falls deep into the ashes. Brimstone and dogs walk over the wastelands that slip between the mountains. Thirsting for grapes my eyes bend in all directions. Hours go by, hours understand.

Once again I deviated from these attempts. Too much blah blah. I had long enough been caught up in the world of philosophical systems and social theories. The world of speech. Why did I have to concern myself so much with words? I had nothing important to share. I did not want to theorise. I wanted to dance.

And dance I did. For hours. Throughout nights. Wherever the opportunity offered itself, even if alone in my room. Dancing showed itself to be a wonder drug against too much thinking. The inner monologue in which I was usually trapped, could do little against the power of rhythm and began to wane. Yet in the end when the legs became heavy and the limbs exhausted the thoughts would again return. The Dionysian was again subject to the Apollonian. Despite this it left its mark. What I'd found in dancing I looked for now elsewhere.

One day I visited an artist friend. At that moment she was paying the bongos. She had the idea suddenly to lay out a sheet of paper on it and to drum with filaments of crayon wax on top of it. Her eyes closed. Shortly a very expressive pattern emerged.

I was immediately infected. The painting consumed me. It further faded out the world of theories and definitions. The break-up of my political worldview with its niggling thoughts which still continued to have an effect on me, in a single moment was swept away. I had found something that demanded all of my attention. It didn't have a particular function, but so what. I'd lost my political ambitions as well as not having had professional ones. I was empty enough to take on something fresh.

Dancing and painting managed to do what all the deepest thinking could not. They freed me from the search for meaning.

The Shutdown Subway

I had a dream that I went to a therapy centre because of some problems and sought help. The centre was a huge, vast system of buildings. Someone picked me up at reception. He led me to the basement. There was an Underground station there.

'The therapy consists of one simple task' he explained. "For the person who solves it his problem is gone. The task is to find your way out of here."

Shortly after he said that, he disappeared. I looked around. On a bench sat a few people. I went up to them and enquired when the next train was going to come and where it was it was going to. An old lethargic man looked up at me with a tormented expression:

“There is no train coming anymore’ he murmured ‘the entire network is out of service. Some people have already waited here for years for the next train. Others tried it on foot and marched through the tunnel. But they didn’t find the way out. They always came back here. Now and again only does someone not turn up. That means he’s made it. But anything more than that, no-one knows.”

I didn’t want to walk along the railway for years. I searched for another possibility. Like in every subway station a stairs led upwards. The exit was shut off by a metal grid. Inside it was a small door. Open.

I thought about it for a moment. The solution couldn’t be that easy. Otherwise the others wouldn’t have spent years vegetating underground.

I approached the door which automatically began to close, but so slowly that I could get through it without any problem.

I was free.

Beyond Meaning

*Huizi said to Zhuangzi, "You're talking about needless things."
Zhuangzi said, "One must first know the needless before one*

can talk to him about the necessary. The earth is wide and big, but to stand on it, you need only enough space to put your foot on it. But if a crack were to form right next to your foot down to the underworld, would the space on which you stand still be of any use to you? Huizi replied, "It would be of no more use to me." Zhuangzi said, "Hence, the necessity of the unnecessary is clear." (Zhuangzi, XXVI, 7)

Anyway I was now painting. I didn't know myself. And as well abstract painting, without any message, aim or reason. If I had seen myself, when I was a convinced communist. At the time, I wanted to be a writer and to use, as effectively as I could, language as a weapon in the struggle for a better world. That was a reason I left my job and went to school. Bertolt Brecht, my great role model, once wrote in his poem,

To Those Who Will Be Born

*What times these are, when
talking about trees,
is as good as a crime,
because it invokes silence
about the injustice
everywhere around us.*

Writing, as I had long been convinced should offer clarity, stir things up. The effect of words was the point of literature. They had a duty to discharge. They should be useful and give delight, as Horaz had stated expressly.

This attitude had become strange to me. The demand for utility was now irksome. This is how manpower had been crafted out

of people and how raw material zones had been created from landscapes. From the zealotry of making a use out of everything, there had to be an escape. If literature and art are to really show a way out of the prison of the mundane everyday, then it must be protected from the demand that it be useful. It shouldn't have to serve outside interests.

*Let there be music, or philosophizing, painting, or poetry; - a work of genius is not a useful thing. To be useless is part of the character of the works of a genius: it is its patent of nobility. All other works of man are there to preserve or facilitate our existence; but not the works at issue here: they are there for their own sake, and in this sense they are to be regarded as the flower or the pure fruit of existence. That is why our hearts are open when we enjoy them: for we emerge from the heavy earth ether of need. - In the same way, we also see that beauty is seldom united with usefulness. The tall and beautiful trees bear no fruit: the fruit trees are small, ugly cripples. The stuffed garden rose is not fertile, but the small, wild, almost odourless one is. The most beautiful buildings are not the useful ones: a temple is not a dwelling house. A person of high and rare mental gifts, compelled to pursue a merely useful business which the most ordinary would have been capable of, is like a delicious vase decorated with the most beautiful painting, which is used as a cooking pot; and to compare the useful with the people of genius is like comparing bricks with diamonds. (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Imagination*, 1819)*

Art for Art's sake was for me in my communist period a bourgeois decadence. The target to free humanity from suppression and exploitation overshadowed everything. Whatever served this end only could justify itself.

Now I saw the claim that art should be useful, was just an attempt to deprive it of its explosive quality. I had become suspicious of political art above everything else. Its practical purpose meant the suppression of creativity to serve utilitarianism and therefore betray its subversive potential.

Abstract art however completely went hand in hand with my new approach to art. As a pure game of colour and form it was free from meanings. It didn't make any statements, nor represent anything. In that sense it is empty.

So, because it is empty it stimulates the creative urge to fill itself. From nothing sprang up landscapes, animals, dancing figures and strange symbols. There is no sense, and indeed there was no end of meanings. It is without sense but entices the senses. The fantastical resonates.

Thirty spokes meet in the hub of a wheel.

Its emptiness makes the wheel usable.

You form clay to create a vessel.

Its emptiness makes the vessel useful.

(Laozi, 11)

Movement

Around the time I began to paint I began to dance Argentine tango as well. Turning in the dance, initially, was difficult, but I found a working method for me to practise on my own: I filled a cup to its edge with tea, and tried to carry out the movements without spilling anything. Soon I noticed that it wasn't only a good dance exercise. It was, as well as that, a way to find a tranquillity inside. It was the same effect as when in painting I was in the process of concentrating on drawing lines. Just like with painting I wasn't only able to express my moods but to change them also.

Lines on paper or on canvas are traces of body movement and as well the movement of feelings. They reflect inner states. A stroke drawn with a powerful movement produced a powerful effect. Lines created in an upbeat mood, appeared easily, without effort. Whoever would like to draw a circle free-handed had to find his middle-point.

I drew very fast. A picture had to at least be finished after a few minutes, if I was still to be in the same mood as when I started. Then the expression was genuine. I tried to let the lines have their own flow, without any plan, or control. In the pictures that came out of this, I hoped to find a deeper reality which lay hidden beneath my everyday thought process.

My pictures were very expressive. But what did they express? An epistle from my soul? Or was it just the machinery of my body, whose proportions the lines would complement? I did not find out. The pictures did not give an answer. They were a

riddle. I could not say what they meant even though I regarded them as a success. I couldn't say why but I had my own criteria for doing so. I learned a lot about the expression of lines and colours along the way, further influencing my style. I was only the observer of a process, which itself turned in its own particular way, developing its own dynamic, which I didn't consciously steer. I allowed myself to be surprised by where the journey went. It was an adventure.

The Art of Business and the Art of Life

The prince: Good morning Conti. How are you living? How is your art?

Conti: Prince, the art follows the bread.

The prince: That doesn't have to be. That shouldn't be the case.

(Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Emilia Galotti, 1st Act)

While I was enthusiastically painting and dancing, gradually oblivious to the world around me, it was undergoing very serious changes. After the breakup of the socialist state system in Eastern Europe the struggle between Capitalism and Communism was finally decided. The western model was victorious. There was - so it seemed - no other alternative. The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared in his book that history had ended. That meant that the era of the utopias was over. Criticising the system fell out of fashion. Even those sections of the political left, who had often been hostile to the actual socialist states, fell, for the most part, into a state of lethargy. Even the environmental movement became

closer to the ever expanding liberal market ideal. Whoever propagated a future vision different to the prevailing wisdom, was regarded as a crackpot.

Instead of political concepts most of the younger generations were planning careers. All areas of life seemed to have been pulled into the vortex that was market-economy thinking. I chose art just at the point when it was gradually going from being a vocation to an occupation.

‘Can you live from your art?’ I was often asked at exhibitions. ‘Or is it only a hobby?’ I felt as an artist that I had to constantly make a public declaration of my income. In Europe it’s actually taboo, to ask someone about their income. With regard to artists that doesn’t apply however. It is often the first question that complete strangers will ask. For a lot of people art must make its presence felt through economic success in order to be taken seriously.

At my early exhibitions I sold a few pictures, at even good prices, for an unknown painter. To live from that though it was still too little. From these financial straits I was saved by an inheritance. It wouldn’t be enough in the long run, but it did tie me over for a few years. It allowed me access to the free life of an artist.

If someone would dedicate themselves solely to meditation, almost nobody would have the idea to measure the quality of this meditation according to the money it would yield. Art was as well a way to nurture my awareness. At least I could for the time being, see it in this light and not as a source of income.

When many years later I got into Chinese calligraphy, I found something corresponding to my early involvement with art. Calligraphy also has a connection to meditation. You sit upright and gather your breath. You begin your first line when exhaling. The goal is not initially to develop an own style - if at all - a practice reserved for the great masters after decades. Instead the calligrapher tries to attain to the perfection of an ancient tradition. It has to do with reaching a kind of tranquillity. The ego takes a step backwards, or is otherwise felt to be disruptive, as something that inhibits the energy flow. Qi, the energy that is supposed to be brought into harmony through calligraphy, is not a personal energy. It blows through humans just as it does the outside world. It's not supposed, like in expressive art, to reveal something from the inside, but has to do rather with what resonates between both inside and out.

From a philosophical point of view, we can content ourselves here with emphasizing that in the eyes of Chinese painters, the drawn line is the real link between humans and the supernatural. For through its inner unity and its ability to vary, the stroke is both unity and multiplicity. It embodies the process through which the person drawing imitates the gestures of creation. (The act of drawing the line corresponds to the act that draws unity from chaos and separates heaven from earth). By absorbing the rhythm and hidden drives of the human being, the stroke is simultaneously the breath, yin-yang, heaven and earth and 'the ten thousand things'. (François Cheng, Fullness and Emptiness)

It can be understood with such a background why in east Asia some styles have held out for so long and why some painters have devoted their life's work to a single motif. What might be strange if someone is used to understanding art as an expression of an inner world, makes sense, if the purpose is to find peace there, fully absorbing oneself in the task. The beauty of pictures created like this isn't planned. It recreates itself from itself.

The Wood Carver

A wood carver carved a bell stand. When the bell stand was finished, all the people who saw it were amazed at its divine work. The Prince of Lu also looked at it and asked the Master, "What is your secret?" The latter replied, "I am a craftsman and know no secrets, and yet there is one thing that matters. When I was about to make the bell stand, I was careful not to consume my life force in other thoughts. I fasted to bring my heart to rest. When I fasted for three days I no longer dared to think of reward and honour; after five days I no longer dared to think of praise and blame; after seven days I had forgotten my body and all my limbs. In that time, also I no longer thought about the court of Your Highness. Thus I was collected in my art, and all infatuations of the outside world had disappeared. Afterwards I went into the forest and looked at the trees in their natural growth. When the right tree came before my eyes, the bell stand was ready in front of me, so that I only had to put my hand on it. If I had not found the tree, I would have given up. Because I let my nature interact with the nature of the material, that's why people think it's a divine work." (Zhuangzi, XIX.10)

Theme and Variations

At painting I tried various items, which aren't the classic painting tools, for example fingernail brushes or serrated spatulas, as tilers use. If you drag sticky paint on paper or on a canvas with this tool, then a relief is created that reminds you of cardboard grooves - or of the traces which Zen monks drag along the pebbles of stone gardens with their rakes.

Also when you paint with flat spatulas the colours fill up on either side rising by a few millimetres. In doing so pictures become three dimensional. You aren't only able to feel them with the eye but also by touch.

One day I tried out wax crayons. They smelt like honey. That's what induced me to buy them. I sat on the floor, in front of me a sheet of paper. I drew a line and marvelled - the line took on the same texture as the wood underneath it. I remembered this from childhood: you could put a coin under a sheet of paper and rub it with a pencil. The coin's imprint clearly showed itself. This technique is called Frottage. Some modern painters, among them May Ernst, used it.

Suddenly I had an idea, to make frottage from my reliefs. These weren't anymore just images, but tools also, from which to create others. With the same motif I could now produce many near identical copies and then colour them differently. I could with always the same pattern play around with different colours. These would very abruptly or softly encounter or complement each another. Each time I got to know the original

better, each time bringing new ideas. It led to a series with various versions of the same basic motif.

In doing this, an entirely new perspective for my art work came into being. The reliefs were created within a few minutes, some even within seconds. Now I could stretch out the time, exploring the same lines again and again, in the process experiencing anew the same motif.

The Evolution of a Motif

*From the Dao emerges one,
From one emerge two,
From two emerge three,
From three emerge the ten thousand things.*

(Laozi, 42)

At some point I discovered, that it was also possible to make frottage from the underside of reliefs. Then the motif was reflected in its mirror image. Following that I worked a lot with the symmetry which resulted. For a long time, I had described my paintings as spontaneous, wild and expressive. But suddenly there was a strict symmetrical order.

From symmetry you can endlessly develop repeating patterns. This is also the principle behind several Moorish tiles, where every interstice forms a point in the symmetrical pattern. In Spain and Portugal I would marvel at this art. Now having discovered how to simply create complicated symmetrical structures, I began to design ceramic tiles.

I experienced, how from a single basic design a decades long creative process would grow. It all began with one square frottage detail. In 1991 I drew the underlying image in a few minutes.

From this original motif I developed new ones, where I would cut them into halves crossways or diagonally, and again with the mirror image fashion a square from them. New designs would emerge to which I would do the same. Within a short time, I had dozens of different motifs. They were all different, but had from their original at least one edge that complemented the motif of another one. In this way I could bind the different patterns to abstract compositions. It turned out that the number of possible combinations were astronomical. I was unexpectedly brought into a world of symmetrical and mathematical relationships.

Bit by bit, I discovered in the emerging images different figures and shapes: flowers, snakes, fish and birds. Years later, in China, I used to compose Chinese characters out of the same patterns. In order to point out the endless metamorphoses of all these forms, I developed animations and interactive games at the computer. My art brought me into contact with people who still used traditional handicraft techniques. Over the course of years, I had tiles produced in different countries. Ceramic workers, woodcutters, and stonecutters deployed their individual expertise and regional finishing methods to aid me in creating a huge project out of a small basic motif.

The Emergence of an Art Universe

The liege lord Yuan of Song wanted to have some cards drawn. A bunch of scribes came together, and after receiving their instructions, they lined up in rows, licking their brushes and rubbing ink. There were so many of them that half of them had to stay outside the door. There was only one scribe, who arrived too late; he strolled along without haste. When he had received his instructions, he did not line up like the others, but returned to his room. When the Duke sent someone to look for him, he was found sitting on the floor half-naked, shirtless, with his legs spread. "He will do it," said the liege lord. "He's a real artist." (Zhuangzi, XXI, 7, according to the translation by Mair / Schumacher)

Painting for me from the very beginning was no great deal. I let myself drift with the development of the process, which, considering the results, seemed as linear, as if I had from the start a specific concept. There was no taking detours. Every step was built on the previous one. I only ever saw what had just been completed, never the next stage, just like a rail traveller, who sits with his back to the direction in which the train travels, always seeing the landscape he has just crossed through.

As if from a big bang a universe emerged out of a few quick lines, one that I could never fully explore, even if I'd my entire life never concerned myself with anything else. In its breadth was as much space for unfettered expression as there was for mathematical stringency, as much for the clarity of a concept as for complete freedom.

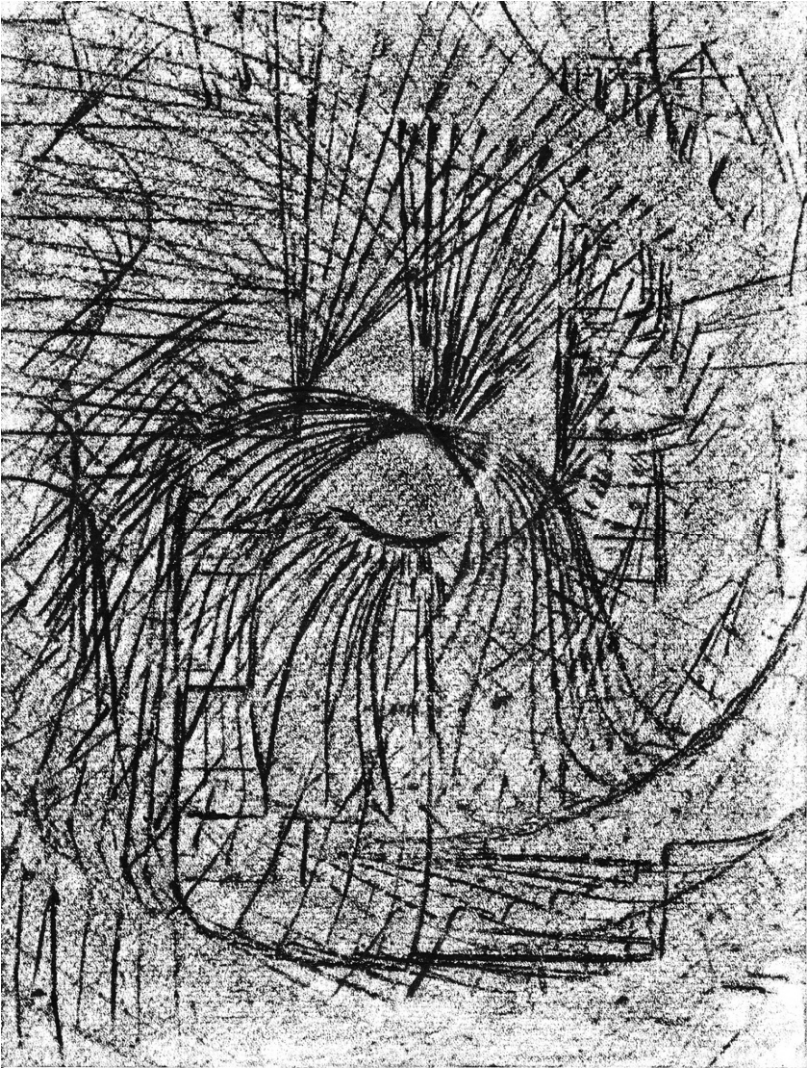
I've known since that from each tiny spot pathways emit into eternity. Creative energy can from nothingness over the course of years allow an inexhaustible diversity to grow. I only had to let this energy flow, then the effects would issue from themselves. It didn't otherwise require special circumstances, nor especial genius, or a plan. It was enough to let things be, as well as to just sit there and be amazed.

To my paintings a new dimension had been added. They were not stand-alone objects anymore, but rather bore witness to one long journey. The actual artwork wasn't the picture alone, but was in fact the experiment, through the process of which it came into being. This was a self organising process whose intelligence far overtook mine. Its own dynamic functioned as if to a numinous plan of its own

In principle, that's what I had hoped to get from painting when I took it up under the sign of the magician.

A tree of a wide circumference is formed from a hair-thin stalk. A tower, nine floors high is formed from a heap of earth. A thousand miles of journey begins at your feet. (Laozi, 64)

The Art of Being Useless



Part 11

Reflection

The Centre

Zhuangzi was hiking in the mountains. He saw a big tree with rich leaves and lush branches. A woodcutter stood beside it, but didn't touch it. When asked why, he replied, "It's useless." Zhuangzi said, "This tree, by its unfitness, has been given years to complete its life." When the Master left the mountain, he spent the night at the house of an old friend. The old friend was pleased about the visit and told his servant to slaughter and roast a goose. The servant allowed himself to ask: "One can scream, the other cannot; which one shall I slaughter? The host said: "Slaughter the one that cannot scream!" The next day, the disciples asked the Zhuangzi, "Recently, in the mountains, the tree, because of its uselessness, has been given years to complete its life. The host's goose, on the other hand, has paid for its uselessness with death. Which is preferable, Master?" Zhuangzi smiled and said, "I prefer to keep the middle ground between usefulness and uselessness. That is, it may seem so; for in reality, even that is not enough to avoid entanglements. But he who entrusts himself to the Dao and its power in order to skim over this world is not so. He is exalted above praise and reproach, sometimes like the dragon, sometimes like the serpent; according to the times he changes and is averse to all one-sided action; sometimes high up, sometimes low down, as the inner balance requires; he soars up to the forefather of the

world. To treat the world as the world, but not to allow the world to pull you down to the world: in this way you are free from all entanglement. The one who takes the things of the world and the traditions of human relationships seriously is quite different. Where there is agreement, there is separation; where there is becoming, there is passing; where there are corners, there is filling; where there is prestige, there is judgment; where there is action, there is failure; where there is wisdom, there are plans, and uselessness is despised. How could there be security for such a person? Oh, my students, remember this: "Only in the Dao and its power is our home." (Zhuangzi, XX, 1)

Retreating and Resistance

As a young man I was a political activist. Then I lost my revolutionary idealism. So I went from being active to not. Being idle didn't mean a withdrawal for me, but rather another form of rebellion. I understood it as an alternative blueprint to a society, which demands performance and competitiveness.

This attitude was so solidly grounded in my life experiences, that my political orientation in the course of time took on dogmatic traits. I had once again become one-sided. I didn't become conscious of this by thinking about it but through external experiences.

When back from China we had to first process all of the impressions we'd picked up there. We were once again living in Hamburg but in our minds were still in Beijing. Martina was

writing a book about our time there, and I sunk myself in Chinese philosophy as well as taking lessons in Tai Chi.

We were only marginally aware that very close to us, young people were occupying trees, enduring a freezing, icy Winter. Other residents brought the occupiers food and hot water bottles. For me however, the Plaza of Heavenly Freedom was still nearer than the trees around our apartment.

The occupation was supposed to prevent trees being felled for a construction site to be created there. An energy utility wanted to construct a gigantic power plant on the other side of the Elbe and there generate heat for the Hamburg network – a mammoth project, one which decades from now would cause Hamburg to be dependent on coal. The required energy pipeline was going to be laid right through our neighbourhood.

Luckily, the occupiers were successful. The trees survived the winter. A temporary court order halted all further work until all objections by citizens were examined by the authorities. With this action, time had been gained, enough for us, to realise that the tree in front of our house was under threat. It needed our protection. As an initial step Martina put together an objection:

The Tree Outside The Window

In front of my window a tree stands. An oak. The first thing I see after waking up is this tree. In the Summer it filters the sunlight into diffuse rays, through its branches and leaves, and shadows dance on the wall.

Planted about 50 years ago, its crown reaches from my bedroom across the two windows of my work room. And further than that too, so that my flatmate in the room next to me has the feeling, that the tree is actually in front of his window.

In Spring I wait impatiently for the first shoots of this tree. Taking his time, keeping me waiting, until suddenly, almost in a beat, he begins to sprout and from one day to the next becomes greener and fuller. From the sofa in the work room I watch sparrows, pigeons, and blackbirds, who visit him and bob up and down on its branches. On darkened days, raindrops fall from leaf to leaf. I watch them, in a melancholic mood, and drink tea, feeling oddly consoled.

To fully understand, what this tree means to me, a person would have to know that I live on a very noisy street with its six lanes of traffic. Fire-engines, police and ambulances race past with sirens howling. At night there are the heavy transport trucks. Sleeping with the window open is impossible. When I breathe in, it tastes of fumes not of fresh air. However as soon as I step into my room I see a green canopy almost as if I were living in a park. The tree in front of my window allows me to cope with the street.

Luckily it isn't in a rush to shed its leaves. First it has its fruit, and then very gradually becomes yellow-gold and lighter, until one morning after a storm I look at its naked branches. Another summer gone by. The tree accompanies me throughout the year. Now, on the other side, I see the ugly house frontage, the large billboard glaringly lit up by night. The police sirens and the street traffic clang louder. Yet on the bare tree sometimes a bird

sits on its limbs. I'll wake up at some point and the branches will be covered magically in snow and I cuddle once more into the blankets. Now winter has truly begun. The long winter. Impatiently I wait for the first shoots to bloom. Once again I forget when it began the previous year. Doesn't matter I think to myself, we still have time together, me and the tree. Next year I'll remember for definite.

I imagine how we will become older together, I more grey-haired and wrinkly, he thicker and more gnarly. Drinking tea, I'll see the raindrops falling from its leaves.

Now however a large, new power-plant is being built, one a lot of experts in energy politics view as misguided. And the power line that belongs to it is apparently going to run through our street. The trees at the edge of the street are meant to be hacked down.

I am surprised myself about how confused and sad I am at the thought that this tree, in front of my window, can no longer stand there.

As it is like that for me with this tree, it is surely like that with other residents and 'their' tree. It is strenuous to live in a street such as ours. We need to have the trees, that patch of green, to stick it out.

Martina Bölck

Idleness and Politics

I was happy that I didn't have a lot to do then. During our time in China we had gotten together enough savings to be able to approach matters with ease. I gave a German course for two hours, each time, twice a week. That was all. So, I was able to focus myself on the resistance against the utility company's plans. In order to save our tree, I became a full-time activist. By contrast, a lot of neighbours, as impassioned as me, complained, that their work obligations didn't allow them the time to stand against the pipeline. Doing nothing ensured me the freedom to do something, at the very right time.

People always ask how to follow the Dao. It's as simple and natural as the behaviour of a heron standing in water. The secret of the bird's serenity lies in a particular kind of vigilance. The bird moves when it has to and it doesn't move when the silence is right. The secret of its serenity lies in a particular kind of vigilance, in a kind of contemplation. The heron does not simply doze silently. He is in a state of lucid silence. It stands motionless in the flowing of the water. It is looking very calm and awake. When Dao brings him something he needs, he seizes the moment without hesitation or thought. Afterwards he returns to the state of silence without disturbing himself or his surroundings. If he hadn't found the right position in the current and hadn't waited patiently, he wouldn't be able to do so.

(Deng Ming-Dao, 365 Tao, 14.1.)

My new insight, that political action required a certain measure of idleness, was confirmed, I found, through a reading of

Aristotle's Politics. According to this, it's not in the interest of tyrants to allow the citizens to recuperate. Monumental buildings like the Egyptian pyramids can be understood in that sense of dictatorship (ref. Aristotles, Politics, Book 5, Paragraph 11).

By implication that means, that time doing nothing is vital for the long term survival of a democracy. An overly-functioning society, in which all areas of life labour under a permanent acceleration undermines the fundamentals of freedom. Only when people have enough time on their hands are they free to look after the things that lie close to their heart.

Some people are so occupied cleaning up the water, that they never reach up to turn off the faucet. (Fritz Reheis - Deceleration)

Walking with Philosophy

I joined a neighbourhood initiative that was set up against the pipeline. We wanted to counter the plans of the power company with the culture of a lively town area. Artists could take over sponsorship for individual trees under threat, and the parks and streets of the area would become places to get together, meeting-points where we could discuss ecological and political matters. That's how we wanted to involve many people into our resistance. We organised readings and eventually philosophy walks.

I looked for topics that I could bring along. That I hit the spot with Zhuangzi didn't have to do only with my enthusiasm for

the old Chinese philosophy, but primarily, that some Zhuangzi texts are still provocative enough even in current debates to cause lively discussion.

The Drawing Well

Zi Gong had wandered in the state of Chu and returned to the state of Jin. As he passed through the area north of the Han River, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had been digging ditches for irrigation. The old man went down into the well himself and brought up a jar of water in his arms and poured it out. He struggled to the utmost and yet achieved little. Zi Gong said, "There is a device that can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day. With little effort a lot can be achieved. Would you like to use it?" The gardener straightened himself up, looked at him and said, "What would that be?"

Zi Gong said, "You take a wooden lever arm, weighted at the back and light at the front. That way you can scoop the water so that it just gushes. It's called a draw-well." A vexed look passed through the man's face and he said, with a smile, "I heard my teacher say: If a man uses machines, he does all his business machine-wise; if a man does his business machine-wise, he gets a machine heart. And if one has a machine heart in his chest, he loses his pureness. He who has lost his pure quality becomes uncertain in the movements of his mind. Uncertainty in the movements of the mind is something that is not compatible with the true Dao. It is not that I did not know such things: it would shame me to use them." (Zhuangzi, XXIV, 4)

Beyond Utopias

The tree outside my window, after over twenty years, induced me again to act politically. But I didn't do this anymore out of a Marxist minted theory of progress. Progress as I now speculated could also be a step to preserve something worth keeping. The world was already changing by itself, and doing so with increasing speed. With somewhat more respite and consideration, I thought, enough would be able to get done.

I believed in a backward looking Utopia as little as I believed in a forward looking one. The man who refused to use the draw-well seemed as equally bewildering to me as he must have had already in Zhuangzi's age.

All the same, the story of the elderly man in the garden fascinated me, bringing up for discussion a very modern theme, namely that every technology moulds people, who make use of it. So modern living will become all the more rushed, more breathless the faster our computers are set. Technology, which should actually have made life more comfortable, is driving humanity away from itself. Mankind celebrates freedom and individuality yet most are becoming less free and more uniform, muzzled in disquiet, unable to reach out to themselves. Aspirational targets are pitched ever higher, and only a few can reach them.

The people of the masses seek to force things that cannot be forced, and so they are in a constant state of agitation. Because they let their excitement run free, they always have something

to do and to strive for. But the excitement destroys them in the long run. (Zhuangzi, XXVII, 11)

Even the relationship towards plants and animals is distant and technical. For warmth and empathy there remains little space.

"They always left some rice for the mice.

They didn't light lamps out of mercy to the moths."

Such thoughts, like those of the ancients, are powers that help us become truly human.

Without them, we are just blocks of earth and wood.

(Hong Yingming, I, 170)

A lot of people today judge themselves according to their usefulness as much as anything else spurring themselves on to ever higher performance. More and more feel permanently overwhelmed. In an ever worsening competitive struggle the last energy reserves are doggedly thrown into action. Whether human or nature, everything is to be calculated. Everything is made useful and useful things are tested, thereupon, to see how they can be used more efficiently. It's set up for competition and struggle.

It is a battle without victors. Even the successful, who are pushed upward, pay for their career with constant overload. Politicians seem to have aged already years after one term in office, company bosses scamper through the appointments of restless days planned in advance, always on the guard for competition, which never sleeps. They are the pitiable victims of their own ambitions, their hunger for prosperity, power and fame.

These leather helmets and caps with feather bushes, all the medals and decorations and long sashes only serve to tighten their expressions. Inside they are stuffed with brushwood, and outside they are tied up with double ropes and bands, and there, from their bands and ropes, they look out, satisfied and placid thinking they have made it. So could the criminals also, whose arms are crossed, and are thumbscrew fastened, think they have made it, as well as the tigers and panthers in sacks and cages. (Zhuangzi, XII, 15)

“To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all”. Oscar Wilde

Whoever rates enjoyment of life higher than status must find a way not to let him or herself be infected with the common drives of the market place. Valuable advice to this end can be found in the ancient Chinese texts. Four hundred years ago Yuan Tschonglang already wrote:

I think joy is a rare gift in this life. Joy is like the colour of the mountains, the taste of the water, the splendour of the flowers and the charm of women. It is appreciated only by those who have understanding, and it is difficult to describe in words. (...) Joy of life is inborn; it cannot be acquired. It is most often found in children. They have probably never heard the word "joy", but you can see it in their faces everywhere. It is hard for them to be serious; they wink, make faces, talk to themselves, jump, bounce, skip around and scuffle. (...) The further away a person is from his nature, the harder it is for him to enjoy life. Some succumb to the allure of pure pleasure and call it "fun", they take pleasure in meat, wine and sexual excess. They despise

traditional customs and claim that in this way they free themselves from all shackles. As a person progresses in life, they often occupy an ever higher position and enjoy ever greater social prestige; body and mind are handicapped by a thousand burdens and strict duties. Knowledge, scholarship, and life experience even clog the pores and penetrate the joints which go stiff. The more one knows, the greater his confusion becomes, and the further he distances himself from understanding the joy of life. (According to Lin Yutang)

Such convictions in China came from an ancient tradition. Zhuangzi, of over 2300 years ago was not their originator. He passed on an approach from a murkier prehistory, an ancient legacy of humanity.

Those who knew how to protect themselves from time immemorial did not adorn their knowledge with evidence. They did not seek to wear the world out with their knowledge. They did not seek to exhaust life with their knowledge. They bided in their place on a steep hill and keeping to their nature. What should they have done? The Dao is not of little virtues; life is not of little knowledge. Little knowledge damages life; little virtues damage the Dao. Consequently, it is said: to make oneself right is everything. The highest joy is to reach the goal. What the ancients called the attainment of the goal was not state carriages and crowns, but simply the joy to which nothing can be added. What today is understood by achieving the goal are state carriages and crowns. But state carriages and crowns are only something external and have nothing to do with real life. What chance brings from the outside is only temporary. One

should not reject the temporary when it comes and not hold on to it when it goes. Therefore, one should not become selfish in his aims for the sake of external distinctions, nor should he want to do it like others for the sake of external hardship and difficulties. Then our joy is the same in good fortune and misfortune, and one is free from all worries. Nowadays, however, people lose their joy when the passing things leave them. From this point of view, even in the midst of their joy, they are always restless. That is why it is said: Those who lose their self to the outside world, those who surrender their self to others: these are false people. (Zhuangzi, XVI, 4)

Zen and the Art of Being Free

I got deeper into the Chinese classics and sifted through them looking for interesting passages which I could bring into the discussion, and was at the same time unpleasantly reminded of my communist phase. Did I want once again to spread around some writings for mankind's good like a zealot missionary? I knew of the chasm that gaped often between a text's intention and its effect. Where did the hope come these books would be understood as I wanted?

Ancient wisdom is not a magical substance. Like everything that can be encapsulated in words it can be misleading. Even the historical impact of old Chinese thought has its dark side.

The Daoist philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi had many points in common with Buddhism. Both systems of thought agreed generally to not strive after power and wealth, as well as to not

lose oneself in the external world. So it wasn't any wonder when Buddhism came from India to China, that schools came into being which melded it with Daoism. The most distinctive is the symbiosis of Buddhist and Tao elements in Chan Buddhism, which over time spread to Japan, leaving, over the centuries, a distinct impression on the culture there, under the name of Zen. Zen taught its followers to do away with egotistical motives, until the destruction of the ego. To become empty was the point of Zen practice.

That made it possible to use Zen Buddhism as an instrument. Warriors in the military, devoid of their own ambitions, make for loyal subordinates. Zen became a school for warriors who would, without question, follow their commanders.

Japanese militarism and imperialism could eventually build on the massive support of the Zen monasteries. Zen monks were deeply implicated in the Japanese war crimes of the Second World War.

Dissolving the ego is possible only when you don't submit to another ego, because it is the ego that is doing the submission and is therefore still active. If you subordinate yourself to prevailing power structures, then the empty Zen mind that goes beyond good and evil, praise and admonition, profit and loss, can be twisted to cold blooded obedience. The attempt to give up the ego means then the availability for the aspirations of outside egos. So practising Zen can be a way of straying from it.

That doesn't say anything against Buddhism nor against Zen, in as much as the crusades do of Christianity or Islamic Terror of Islam. It only confirms the law that nothing can be harnessed more effectively to one's self-serving ends than what is sacred to many and touches them deep down.

Dao and the West

I avoided the danger of becoming a Daoist missionary merely by the fact that we were successful. The energy company gave up on its plans – on one hand because of massive resistance, on the other because of technical conditions relating to the construction itself. So our enthusiasm to go ahead with such projects as the philosophy-walk fizzled out. Along the way, though, I infected one or more people with my enthusiasm for old Chinese philosophy. I still think that it can be a worthwhile contribution to many of today's debates.

Dao philosophy has a millennia long history in East Asia. It is as well the history of attempts to tame it, channel its energies and to make it useful for each and every sort of purpose. In the West, by contrast, though sometimes made superficial reference to, the teachings of the old Chinese masters are relatively fresh and untapped still.

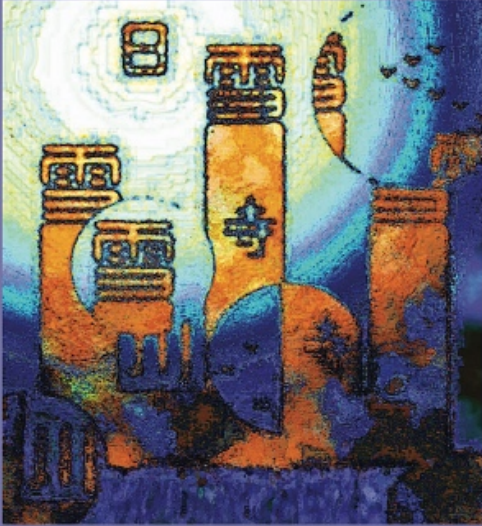
Here, especially where war-related values of honour and blind self-sacrifice have fallen into disrepute, the ancient Chinese scriptures could, freed from the dust of centuries, take on a fresh dynamic. The combination of the Western desire for self-awareness and self-development, as well as the wisdom of the

ancient East, which proposes there is no need for ever increasing activity but instead a more alert restfulness, as well as clearer introspection, could pioneer new ways when the old ones would no longer in the future be viable. So despite all the darker scenarios of the future, perhaps things could still turn to good.

What I call good has nothing to do with morality, but is simply the kindness of one's own mind. What I describe as good has nothing to do with taste, but is simply opening up to the feelings of one's own life. What I call hearing has nothing to do with the perception of the outside world, but is simply the perception of one's own inner being. What I call looking has nothing to do with seeing the outside world, but is simply seeing oneself. The one who does not see this, but only the outside world; the ones who do not possess themselves, but only the outside world: possess only foreign possessions and not their own possessions, achieve only foreign success and not their own. (Zhuangzi, VIII)

The Art of Being Useless

LIVING AND LOVING THE IDLE LIFE



translated from German by Fergus Kelleher

Jupp Hartmann

This is an account of the author's philosophical leanings toward the Dao and how he got there. Read how he 'unwires' himself from the patterns common to different mind-sets while painting, dancing, teaching and 'idling' around the world.

The Art of Being Useless

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