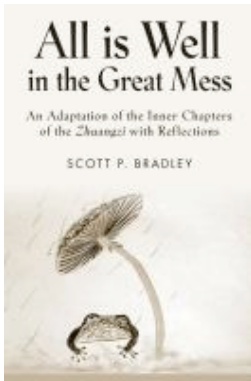


# All is Well in the Great Mess

An Adaptation of the Inner Chapters  
of the *Zhuangzi* with Reflections

SCOTT P. BRADLEY





*This book is an adaptation of and interpretive commentary on a portion of the Classical Chinese work known as the Zhuangzi. As such, it is principally a philosophical work. However, since it hopes to stimulate others to grow their own philosophies of life, it might also be described as a work advocating self-improvement.*

# ALL IS WELL IN THE GREAT MESS

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**ALL IS WELL  
IN THE  
GREAT MESS**

**AN ADAPTATION OF THE INNER  
CHAPTERS  
OF THE *ZHUANGZI*  
WITH REFLECTIONS**

**SCOTT P. BRADLEY**

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# **PART ONE**

## **ADAPTED TEXT AND REFLECTIONS**



# CHAPTER ONE

## WANDERING FREE IN NON-DEPENDENCE

### THE TEXT—PART ONE

#### WANDERING FAR AND UNFETTERED

1 A vast fish named Not-Yet-Really-a Fish (Kun) dwells in the Mystery-of-Pre-Existence (the Northern Oblivion). This fish transforms into Existence as a vast bird named Just-Like-You (Peng). This bird must wait upon the yearly monsoon and then, with a great effort ascends ninety thousand miles to make its Flight-of-Existence to the Mystery-of-Post-Existence (the Southern Oblivion).

2 All this is found in *The Equalizing Jokebook*.

3 Is blue the sky's true color? Looking up, we do not know. Peng flies so high that when he looks down he also sees only blue without knowing why.

4 A big bird requires a lot of wind to get aloft and goes far. A small bird requires little wind to get aloft and goes only a short distance. Yet are they not in many ways the same?

5 But the cicada and tiny dove scoff and laugh at Peng for going so high and far and believe that their short glides are the best and only reasonable way to fly.

6 It's very difficult for a small awareness to understand the experience of a large awareness. Consider the morning mushroom; it knows nothing of noon. Or consider the cicada that is born and dies in winter; what can it know of the other seasons? Yet there are trees that live for millennia and a man named Pengzu who lived for hundreds of years. We think that some

live short lives and others long lives, but such distinctions are only relative to our species determined perspective. We would love to live as long as Pengzu, but the trees would laugh at us for the pettiness of our ambition. Is there a sense in which long duration and short duration are the same?

## **THE TEXT—PART TWO**

7 Human beings typically think just like the cicada and tiny dove. They take their small accomplishments as meaningfully fulfilling their lives and scoff at the idea of being free of both 'meaning' and 'fulfilment'. They slave away at trying 'to be somebody'.

8 Some, like my good friend Huizi who became prime minister of Liang, think that the opinion of others—that they are 'great and successful men'—suffices to make them 'somebody'. They depend on the external.

9 But even the philosopher Song Xing would laugh at them. Song understood that the opinion of others could not fulfil one's need to be 'somebody' and instead focused on the internal, on self-respect. If the whole world praised or condemned him, it would not concern him. He also said that an insult could not bother us if we were 'somebody' by our own reckoning. But does this truly suffice to make us 'somebody', or do we still need to strive?

10 Some, like Liezi, pursue 'spiritual' achievement in an attempt to be 'somebody'. He was so 'spiritual' that he could 'ride the wind' for fifteen days before coming back. But still he depended on the wind—and isn't this just emblematic of his continued dependence on the need to be 'somebody', even if a 'spiritually advanced' somebody?

11 But what if you depended on nothing at all? Imagine that. What if you just charioted upon whatever seems true of the cosmos and upon everything and anything that happens? How could your soaring ever be brought to a halt?



12 That's why I say that the person with the vastest possible human awareness—let's call her a 'sage'—has no need to "be somebody" at all—she has no-fixed-identity—and thus no need to accomplish great deeds or to be esteemed by others.

## **TEXT—PART THREE**

13 Now, when the mythical sage-emperor Yao realized that the sage Xu You brought prosperity to his Empire without actually doing anything, he asked if he wouldn't take over the Empire from him. "It's stupid to keep the torches burning when the day has come or to water the fields when it's raining," he said. But Xu You replied, "Since the Empire is already prospering, why would I want to *do* something? Only if I wanted 'to be somebody'; but to need to be somebody is to be as dependent as a guest. The tailorbird calls the vast forest home, but is content to nest on a single branch. The mole has an entire river at his disposal, but only drinks a belly-full. I have my role and you have yours—so keep your Empire."

14 Now, Jian Wu related to Lian Shu the words of the madman Jieyu who spoke of having an awareness vast like the cosmos—words that Jian found completely ridiculous and impossible for human beings to realize. Lian wanted to know what he could possibly have said!

15 Jian replied, "He said there is a seemingly ageless sage, living on a holy mountain while subsisting on only wind and dew, riding the wind, and hitching his chariot to dragons so as to wander beyond the known world. He said this sage concentrates his spirit and all things flourish. Personally, I think this is a lot of ridiculous 'big talk' and can't believe it."

16 "Of course you can't!" replied Lian Shu. "Blindness is not only a physical malady. If you were to believe it, in any case, that would be like a virgin pretending to know all about love-making. This sage has no need to be known or believed. He lets the world sort out its own mess, and all things flourish; why would he want to impose himself upon it?"

17 “And not only that, nothing could ever harm such a man. Floods could not drown him; scorching heat could not burn him. Having no fixed-self, what would he have that could be drowned, burnt or lost? From his leavings you could make mythical sage-emperors like Yao and Shun, though he would think nothing of them.”

18 “It’s like the salesman from Song who took ceremonial caps to sell to the barbarians in the north when they had neither need nor desire for such things. Why would a sage wish to impose himself on others?”

18 “Or, it’s like Yao who, after imposing order upon his Empire, went to see four sages on that same holy mountain and was so amazed that he forgot all about his Empire.”

19 All of this reminds me of my friend Huizi. The King of Wei gave him the seed of a gourd which, when he had grown it, weighed more than a hundred pounds. Unable to think out of the box, he found it too big to use. First, he tried to store water in it, but it was too heavy to lift. Then, he cut it in half to use as a dipper, but it was too big to fit into another container. “It was big to be sure,” he said, “but because it was useless I smashed it to bits.”

20 He was referring to my ‘big words’, of course—just like the dove scoffing at Peng’s high flying or Jian’s rejection of the words of Jieyu. So, I told him he just wasn’t able to see the usefulness of things outside the conventional ideas of usefulness. I told him the story of some silk dyers from Song who had invented a wonderful balm to protect their hands in their winter labors. When a stranger heard of it, he bought it, used it to win a winter sea battle, and was given his own fiefdom. The dyers were bound by convention and slaved away throughout the winter, but the stranger who could think outside the box became a lord.

21 Instead of smashing it to bits, I told him, he could have made it into a boat in which to float about happy and carefree on the rivers and lakes. This is where ‘big words’ can take you! But Huizi’s mind was all tangled up by worldly ideas of success.

22 Another time, Huizi told me about his big, useless Stink Tree. It was so gnarled and twisted that nothing could be made from it and no carpenter would give it a second glance. “And your words are just as big and useless,” he said. “That’s why everyone rejects them!” They do? No matter.

23 So, again I tried to show him how usefulness is largely a matter of perspective, and how conventional ideas of usefulness can often lead you into bondage. Take for example a weasel. It’s really good at catching mice, being incredibly nimble and athletic. But that same leaping athleticism ends up getting it caught in a net. The lumbering yak, on the other hand, is completely useless when it comes to catching mice, but its very bigness insures it will never be caught in a net! So, I told him, why not take your big, useless tree and plant it in the village-of-no-need-to-be-anyone in the vast-fields-of-nowhere-in-particular? “Then you could wander far and unfettered beside it, take a nap beneath it, and do lots of useless nothing together with it!”

24 The Stink Tree, moreover, because of its supposed uselessness will never be cut down. Might not Huizi’s life, if he can similarly learn to be useless, be preserved and flourish?

## **REFLECTIONS—PART ONE**

### **FAR AND CAREFREE WANDERING**

There are numerous facets through which to peer into the heart of Zhuangzi’s essentially mystical vision. There are his logical arguments of which some suggest an intellectual framework by which to imagine a sense of the oneness of all things. Others demonstrate the limits of the reasoning mind so as to invite us to experience life in a more immediate and less mediated way. Another suggests the possibility of the loss of one’s very sense of being a definite and fixed self so as to facilitate an experience of oneness. There are ‘skill stories’ that advocate realizing a sense of self- and world-transcendence through full ‘spiritual’ absorption

into the work at hand. Meditative techniques for achieving an empty openness seem, on occasion, to be suggested. The manner of one's orientation toward the endless procession of events, especially those deemed unavoidable, is often offered as a means to transcendence. All of these and more are presented as both descriptions of a mystical possibility and as a means to its realization. These descriptions and means are, however, in many ways subsumed by these presented here in this first chapter. For a description of this mystical experience we have *xiaoyaoyou*, 'far and carefree wandering'. For a means to the realization of that wandering we have depending on nothing, or, as I choose to call it, non-dependence.

Unlike the titles for the other chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which simply take a word, phrase or name from the opening sentence, those of the Inner Chapters are clearly intended to summarize the contents of the chapters they represent. This suggests that they may have been assigned at the time of their original compilation, while those of the other chapters suggest a later addition for the sole purpose of providing a convenient handle. In any case, it clearly behooves us to examine these titles of the Inner Chapters as integral parts of the text itself.

Thus, we begin with the title of chapter one, *xiaoyaoyou*, far and carefree wandering. If this is indeed descriptive of *Zhuangzi*'s ultimate mystical vision, then, for all its intriguing and inviting qualities, it still strikes us as surprisingly this-worldly and mundane. And so, in a very real sense, it is; for *Zhuangzi* recognized no relevant Ultimate Reality with which to engage or unite, and no cosmic rift in need of redemptive or salvific mending. It is only this world here in which we have our existence that concerned him. And thus his sole aspiration lay in discovering how best to live, how to flourish in our humanity, in the context of this world-experience and its givens. As for the 'rest', it is among the givens of the human experience that this must forever remain unknowable, requires no identification to be what it is, and in any case enfolds us all in a vast and affirming oneness.

*Zhuangzi*'s actual description of this experience in the chapter now under consideration is spare. It emerges only as we engage with the many

stories, parables, anecdotes, dialogs and monologues in the text ahead of us. It is our engagement that elucidates this vision for us, and this, only as we begin to experience it and make it our own. For this reason, we would do best here to let the meaning of far and carefree wandering reveal itself as we work our way through the text.

The suggestion of the possibility of living in the attitude of non-dependence that makes this wandering possible is, on the other hand, clearly detailed in this chapter, as we shall see. Non-dependence is not in-dependence; for it recognizes that all transient beings are by their very nature utterly dependent on each other and upon the mysterious source of their arising. Rather, it is an attitude of release in trust into that very dependence. It is an attitude of trust in that it fears no loss no matter what happens. Where all things form ‘one body’, no singular, individuated body is ever at risk. This is not a guarantee of the perpetuation of a specific identity, but the realization that the fear consequent to the possible loss of individual identity reveals that clinging to our present identity is a source of disharmony, and that our integration into the whole does not require any identity at all. Non-dependence is thus revealed as a release from all fear—ultimately, nothing can harm us, for whatever happens, all is an expression of the Great Happening. All is well in the Great Mess.

## **THE FLIGHT OF EXISTENCE**

Zhuangzi begins with a fantastic myth. This sets the stage for all that follows both in terms of content and methodological tone. In the case of the latter, we are immediately alerted to the playful quality of Zhuangzi’s entire project. None of this should be taken as a presentation of fixed truths which, if unacknowledged or not adhered to, will lead to dire consequences. Take it or leave it; it will not affect ultimate outcomes. Seriousness is the gravest enemy of the serious. Playfulness is an attribute of wandering; to take anything too seriously would be to bring our wandering to a halt.

If we had any doubt about this playful tone, Zhuangzi dispels it by telling us that his myth comes from a book called *The Equalizing Jokebook*

(Ziporyn's translation and admittedly only one of several possible renderings). It is doubtful that any such book existed, and likely that his readers were immediately aware of this fact. He probably made it up. It is itself a joke, and an invitation to not only not take this myth or the points it makes as anything more than a playful suggestion of a possible response to the human experience, but also to not take all that follows as such. Perhaps Zhuangzi wanted us to take this as the title of *his* book. In any case, he never stops inviting us to laugh.

I have taken great liberty in presenting this myth so as to express my primary interpretation of it. The myth itself has many levels of interpretive possibility, and I have chosen that which I think is its primary message, though this will not hinder us from exploring its other possibilities.

We see a vast bird, Peng, arising from one unknowable Oblivion only to fly to another. This represents the actual existential circumstance of everything extant, whether it be a rock, a tree, a human being, or likely, the universe. Thus, I call this the flight of existence. There is, however, something apparently unique about the human experience of this flight of existence, namely that we are aware of ourselves making it, and this leads to our concern that it ends as it began, in complete, unfathomable mystery. When all is said and done, this is Zhuangzi's central concern—how do we make the most of our self-aware existence in the context of its suspension in utter mystery? We might, in a moment of glib rationalism, be tempted to ask what the problem is, but we know in our hearts that the unavoidable fact that our flight will come to an end in death colors the entirety of our life experience. Zhuangzi suggests that, typically, death negatively impacts everyone's life experience, admits that it certainly does his own, and leaves any deniers to their denial. It is the fear of death and pall it throws over life that most concerns Zhuangzi.

This flight ends as it begins, in Oblivion. There are two iterations of the myth given, though I have omitted the second. In the first, the destination, the Southern Oblivion, is called The Pool of Heaven. In the second iteration, it is the Northern Oblivion of origin that is called the Pool of Heaven. They are the same. We are inclined to ask to where we are going,

but it seems just as valid to ask from whence we have come. Since both equally represent unfathomable mystery, no true distinction can be made between them. There is, however, a case to be made for the prioritization of the mystery of origin since it lies behind us as that which might have given us answers were it possible to do so. The fact that it does not informs our present existence. For this reason, in the *Zhuangzi* and later in Zen we are enjoined to consider what we were before our mothers and fathers were born. Whatever that ‘was’ or, more to the point, was not, tells us something about what we presently take ourselves to be. And though Zhuangzi, at least, would not go so far as to answer ‘nothing’, he does think this speaks to the fallacy of the belief that our sense of identity is anything more than a ‘temporary lodging’. Thus, Yan Hui, after the discovery of his own inner emptiness, declares his realization that “‘I’ have never even begun to exist” (4:12). Thus, the myth of the flight of Peng invites us to seriously consider the implications of our suspension in mystery to our very sense of being a discrete self-identity.

## **THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY**

Before Peng was Peng ‘he’ was Kun; before ‘he’ was a bird ‘he’ was a fish. There is no telling what ‘he’ might become next. This is a crucial aspect of Zhuangzi’s advocacy for our psychological uniting with the apparently ceaseless transformation that is the cosmos. The concept of reincarnation, the transmigration of ‘souls’, which also appeals to a sense of a continued participation in the ever-changing, also typically implies a perpetuation of some form of identity. ‘I’ take a new form, but the ‘I’ persists. This is not the view of Zhuangzi. For him, what is important is not that the form changes, but that the very identity transforms from one identity to another. No discreet ‘I’ is thought to continue. Not only is this view much more radical, and immediately less assuring, it is also much more difficult to express. Kun does not become Peng; whatever of Kun there is in Peng is empty of a Kun-identity. In a later chapter, when someone speaks of what ‘he’ will become after death—perhaps a rooster or a bug’s arm—we are required to keep this distinction in mind. The problem arises from the nature of language itself; words signify an identity, and it is therefore near impossible to speak of one thing

becoming something else without that seemingly implying a continuity of some form of identity.

Perhaps we can get a better sense of this when we realize that the name for Kun, whom Zhuangzi identifies as a vast fish, actually means fish roe. Thus, I have named him “Not-Yet-Really-a- Fish”. He is in some sense simply the mere possibility of a fish while simultaneously the vastest fish imaginable. An actual identity, in his case, is already in doubt. We are reminded of Yan’s discovery that his self-identity has not yet begun to exist. Kun represents this inexplicable being-without-a-fixed-identity.

For his part, Peng’s compound name, in addition to referring to a vast mythical bird, the Chinese version of the Phoenix, also designates him as a ‘peer’ or ‘friend’. Vast and exceptional as he is, we are all still his equal. Thus, I have called him “Just-Like-You”.

## **SIZE DOESN’T MATTER**

With this we can shift to the presentation of Peng in the context of the tiny birds and cicada that scoff at his great effort to ascend to ninety thousand miles to make his flight of existence—they make their own flights with much less drama. Clearly we are intended to recognize the greatness of Peng in contrast to the pettiness of these scoffers. Zhuangzi immediately uses this to illustrate the relative differences in perspective between a large consciousness and a small one, and later, in the second chapter, advocates for the former over the latter. These are two distinct points of view regarding the big and the small; one demonstrates that sense in which they can be taken as different but also the same, while the other demonstrates how they are not equal. These two points of view taken together represent an essential principle at work in most all Zhuangzi’s philosophy, namely, the realization of a third, ‘higher’ point of view that is able to embrace both the equality of all things and their inequality. He calls this “Walking Two Roads”. This allows us to simultaneously affirm all things just as they are while also seeking their improvement. Once we understand that things are perfect by virtue of their being perfectly what they are, we can work to make them better.



The tiny bird and cicada, because they scoff and consider their manner of flight “the best and only reasonable way to fly” (1:5), can be judged as having “a closed-awareness bound to a fixed-self [that] is narrow and insular” (2:7). However, this is only implied here. Instead, Zhuangzi frames their differences from Peng in terms of their relative and unavoidable (innate) limitations. The mushroom that grows and dies in a single morning cannot possibly conceive of the afternoon—nor should we expect it to do so. The cicada is born and dies in the winter; would it not be an example of a closed and narrow awareness to judge it as inferior because it doesn’t understand the other seasons? The tiny birds are in error because they scoff, not because they are unable to match Peng’s incredible flight. Were their responses reversed with Peng scoffing at the feeble flight of the birds, while the birds affirmed both their own and Peng’s flights in recognition of the fulfillment of their respective capabilities, then it would be Peng who demonstrated a small consciousness and the birds a large one. Size doesn’t matter; it is the fulfillment of one’s capabilities within one’s limits that matters. Yet, here again we are required to apply “Two Roads”; if the tiny birds scoff, then their scoffing in some sense demonstrates their limitations—can we reasonably expect them to do otherwise? At best all we can do is be the occasion, provide the space, for them to realize another possibility.

Guo Xiang (252-312), the editor of our received *Zhuangzi*, and author of its first extant commentary, states this ‘higher’ point of view succinctly: “Though some are larger and some are smaller, every being without exception is released into the range of its own spontaneous attainments, so that each being relies on its own innate character, each deed exactly matching its own capabilities. Since each fits perfectly into precisely the position it occupies, all are equally far-reaching and unfettered. How could any one be superior to any other” (Ziporyn 2009; p 129)?

## **VASTER AWARENESS IS NOT MORE KNOWLEDGE**

Zhuangzi uses the blue of the sky when we look up to emphasize the incredible height of Peng’s ascent—he is so high that he too only sees blue when he looks down. But Zhuangzi also asks why the sky is blue at all. And thus, since Peng also sees only blue, we are informed that despite

the grandness of his achievement, despite the largeness of his awareness, still this simple mystery remains unsolved. This is critical to understanding Zhuangzi's mystical vision. A vast awareness is not one that has solved life's mysteries, but rather one that has taken full advantage of them to facilitate a greater openness. It is our not-knowing that occasions our open release into the omnipresent Mystery. No new knowledge is acquired thereby. No final understanding is realized. No 'true purpose' is discovered. All remains just as it has always been—inexplicable Mystery.

This is the usefulness of the useless, a theme we shall explore shortly. It also provides a glimpse of Zhuangzi's extraordinary appreciation of the value of our limitations. Never are we enjoined to strive to overcome our innate limitations. Rather, we are encouraged to discover them so as to make the fullest use of them—the more we have and the more we discover the better! We transcend when we fully embrace that over which we transcend. We fly and soar when, like Peng, we have discovered sufficient air resistance to ascend to incredible heights. Without resistance, without obstacles, no transcendence is possible. Very real limits are our only means to a realization of a sense of limitlessness.

## **ZHUANGZI AS PENG**

Finally, we should not overlook Zhuangzi's very personal reasons for framing this myth as he has; he seems to be writing especially to his friend and chief foil, the "logician" Huizi. Indeed, the entire book may very well have been written with Huizi in mind. Some have conjectured that Zhuangzi was once a disciple of Huizi, for he does indeed echo his critique of reason in the second chapter, and makes frequent reference to him throughout. But he has gone beyond his teacher in exploring the implications of the limits of "the understanding consciousness", and here playfully takes his friend to task. Thus the myth can be seen as a reply to the criticisms of Huizi, where Zhuangzi is Peng and Huizi is a relatively tiny creature of small consciousness. It seems to echo a supposed encounter between them related in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter. Huizi has become the prime minister of the state of Liang and hearing that Zhuangzi is coming, fears that he might attempt to usurp his position. After evading attempts

to intercept him, Zhuangzi appears of his own accord and scoffs at the idea that he would seek anything so worthless as worldly power: “In the south there is a bird called ‘Yuanchu’—have you heard about it? This bird rises from the Southern Sea and flies to the Northern Sea, resting only on the sterculia tree, eating only the fruit of the bamboo, and drinking only from the sweetest springs. An owl who had found a rotten mouse carcass saw Yuanchu passing overhead and screeched, ‘Shoo! Shoo!’ Now you—are you trying to shoo me away from your state of Liang” (Ziporyn 2009; p. 76)?

Such an interpretation is further supported in the closing anecdotes of this first chapter where Huizi criticizes Zhuangzi’s philosophy as “big but useless”, very much like the scoffing of the cicada and tiny birds at the fantastic flight of Peng.

The significance of this personal side to these Inner Chapters is twofold. On the one hand, we learn that understanding Huizi contributes to our understanding of Zhuangzi. On the other hand, we realize that his philosophy did not arise in a vacuum, but was rather a product of his engagement with not only Huizi, but also many others of his relative contemporaries. Without Huizi there would likely have been no Zhuangzi. If this seems to relativize and de-mystify that philosophy, so much the better; the way of Zhuangzi is not *the* Way, but rather just another very personal response to life in a particular context. Whatever use to which we put that response, therefore, should similarly be in response to our own unique contexts.

## **REFLECTIONS—PART TWO**

### **BEYOND THE NEED TO ‘BE SOMEBODY’**

We typically dwell within tiny, self-contained bubbles and view the world from that perspective alone—just like the tiny birds and cicada who scoff at Peng’s flight because it is so different from their own. We needn’t see this as a moral issue—doesn’t every individuated being on

the planet do the same? They do. Everything and everyone ultimately sees things from its own perspective and looks after its own interests; this is how they and we survive. In the case of us humans, however, the reality of our self-awareness and the knowledge of our impending death lead to a deep-rooted sense of disharmony within our bubbles. This is a practical problem, not a moral one. We ‘have’ a self. And ‘having’ a self, we fear its loss. This is our greatest fear. But there are other fears as well. If this self were sufficient unto itself, if it stood firm and complete within itself, then we might still fear its possible extinction in death, but at least we would not fear its daily diminution. But we do. This self upon which we lean, it turns out, is a flimsy reed indeed. Though we are sure that it truly exists, it never seems to completely agree with us. It’s like a hologram that requires us to ceaselessly turn the crank that provides the current that energizes it. It must forever prove to itself and others that it is full and real. It believes itself to ‘be someone’ yet paradoxically must continually struggle to be that someone. But is not this fixed ‘someone’ simply a story we have made up? Zhuangzi believes it manifests as such.

Sartre describes human existence, “being-for-itself”, as “a being such that it is what it is not and is not what it is”. This speaks to the reality that we are more a becoming than a being. But we needn’t fully understand what this is intended to convey in order to get a sense of the tenuous character of the human experience it identifies. Nor do we need Sartre—nor Zhuangzi, for that matter—to describe it for us; only a moment of genuine self-inquiry suffices to demonstrate that our self does not and cannot stand on its own; it requires our continuous efforts to prop it up. The entirety of Zhuangzi’s philosophical project can be seen as an attempt to free us from this exhausting labor and the fears that inspire it.

Not surprisingly, we humans think of ourselves as special in a world where we alone seem to be fully conscious of ourselves as selves. And in a very real sense, we are. Yet, it is also the case that in a very real sense we are not special. We seem to be simultaneously of Nature and yet not of it. There are Two Roads at play here as well—two apparently contradictory yet simultaneously arising perspectives—we are both uniquely transcendent of Nature and mundanely the same. The sense of self is something that has arisen in Nature’s unfolding just like everything

else. It is, for all practical purposes, accidental. And like everything in Nature, it presents as something temporary and experimental—wonderful, but somehow flawed; the experiment may become so successful as to endure for a ‘long’ while. Or, it may not. It will, in any case, have its end like everything else. In this context of an awareness of its own temporality, humanity can be relieved of some of the burden of its own sacrosanct self-importance; we can understand how we are not special. We can also understand how that we might be inherently dysfunctional. Out of Nature self-consciousness arose, and out of that a sense of self. Proto-humans left the safety of the trees, started to walk upright on two legs, and became prone to bad backs. Humanity evolved self-consciousness, developed a sense of self, and became internally dualistic and disharmonious. This is the price of admission, the price we must pay for self-awareness. There are exercises and techniques for alleviating the problems arising from having weak backs, and the same for the problem of internal disharmony. Again, this is a practical issue, not a moral one.

Zhuangzi was not plagued by the cultural imposition of a belief in a fixed and immortal human ‘soul’. Thus, he was able to address the experience of self with what for us is a fresh sense of realism. He was, in this sense, very much a phenomenologist. He did not see it as his task to explore what the self actually ‘is’—that would be “to use what the understanding knows to delve into what it cannot know” (6:1). Rather, he simply explored how it manifests; and since it manifests in part as dysfunctional, he sought how to practically remedy that problem. Why? Because life itself wishes to flourish, and human flourishing involves its own self-enjoyment. His remedy does not, therefore, seek to “add something to the process of life”, but rather to let life fulfil itself.

In light of this, we can see why Zhuangzi never advocates for the discovery of one’s ‘true self’ (or ‘essential self’, or in a latter iteration, ‘buddha-nature’), as if there existed some fixed and real self behind or beyond our dysfunctional selves. There is (in actual experience) only this self we now have and with which we can perhaps tinker so as to make it work better in the delivery of our enjoyment of life. The pursuit of some idealized self would be to add to the process of life and would overturn

Zhuangzi's project at the onset. The point is not to realize some idealized self but to realize a new relationship with the one we already 'have'. In this chapter, he calls this no-self, or as I have rendered it (following Ziporyn), "no-fixed-identity".

What does it mean to have no-fixed-identity? By what means might it be realized? Not surprisingly, Zhuangzi is rather vague on both issues, especially in the case of means. This latter sometimes seems presented as a form of meditation as when Ziqi spaces out and loses his 'me' (2:2) or Yan Hui, after practicing "fasting of the heart-mind", discovers that his 'I' "has not yet begun to exist" (4:12). The anecdotal character of these stories taken together with so many more that make no mention of meditation at all suggests caution in assigning strong advocacy of traditional meditative techniques to Zhuangzi, however. We know from our own times, in any case, that those who do advocate for meditation seem almost incapable of speaking of anything else. What he does more frequently seem to advocate is what I call imaginative envisioning. He asks us to imagine what it would be like to think or feel in a certain way, and that, presumably, might help us to make that perspective our own. Thus, in this chapter he asks us to imagine how it would feel to depend on nothing at all, and this, should we manage to envision it, would assist us toward a growing experiential approximation of that vision in our daily lives. We will have occasion to explore these ideas more thoroughly as they emerge in Zhuangzi's wandering text.

As to the meaning of no-self or no-fixed-identity, this too might best be left to unfold with the text itself. What we can say here, in reference to the portion of text now under consideration, is that Zhuangzi seems more concerned with the descriptive psychological behaviors that exemplify no-fixed-identity than he is in delving into the mechanics of some ostensible concrete transformation. It is principally a cultivated change in perspective, not a sudden experience arriving like a bolt from the blue.

## **WANDERING FREE IN NON-DEPENDENCE**

Zhuangzi now presents us with three examples of those who, because they have a 'normal' sense of self and thus a tentative 'somebody', must

continually strive to in fact be that ‘somebody’. There is clearly a progressive aspect to these three responses to the need to ‘be somebody’. He begins with the most obviously petty egoic project, the pursuit of the esteem of others through the achievement of power, prestige and fame. These are the *external* props that support the egoic-self. Here, I have imported reference to Huizi into the text since Zhuangzi likely had him in mind. The final chapter (the 33<sup>rd</sup>) of the *Zhuangzi*, a Confucian-leaning syncretistic consideration of the philosophers of the time, finds Huizi alone as not having expressed even a partial participation in the comprehensive “ancient art of the Dao”, and this primarily because he is perceived as wholly concerned with achieving a “name”. According to this author, Huizi formulated his paradoxes only to wow others. He debated only to defeat others and to thereby gain renown. He sought his identity in things external. Consequentially, he became alienated from his own self: “Hui Shi’s talents were fruitlessly dissipated running after things, and never returning to himself” (Ziporyn 2009; p 125). Zhuangzi himself, though he would likely have agreed with much of this criticism, would, I believe, also have completely embraced him as also a full participant in Dao in that his not-oneness was as much One as any other. And, lest we forget, without him there would have been no Zhuangzi as he developed, if we take Zhuangzi’s own teaching into account—namely, that their opposition generated each other, and that these two can also be united to form a oneness (2:22).

In our own times we are frequently amazed that those who seem to have reached the pinnacle of success, having achieved fame and wealth, so easily crash and burn in an excess of depression. Might it not be that those who have achieved so much in the realm of the external have consequentially come to realize how ineffective this turns out to be in actually making them a complete and fully real ‘somebody’? We who have not reached that pinnacle yet nonetheless still strive in our own petty ways to approximate it may continue to believe that it will achieve this aim. Yet Zhuangzi entreats us to consider the folly of doing so right now wherever we are in the process. It is likely that all of us, should we take the time to engage in a bit of self-inquiry, will discover how we have cultivated an insidious *dependence* on the opinions of others in the

construction of our own project of being ‘somebody’. Seeing how this is the case, we are able to imagine an alternative.

Zhuangzi’s next example presents such an alternative, albeit one that still does not go far enough. The philosopher Song Xing (aka Song Rongzi), a member of the Chia-xia Academy (sponsored by King Xuan (319-310 B.C.E.)) and Zhuangzi’s contemporary, might be described as a proto-Daoist in that he advocated for a subjective shift from an emphasis on the ‘outer’, concerns about the demands of convention and the opinion of others, to the ‘inner’, the cultivation of one’s inherent sense of how best to behave. Perhaps his best known maxim was, “to be insulted is not a disgrace”, which I have imported into the text, although Zhuangzi’s description of this shift, that he didn’t care what the world thought of him, makes the point as well. Broadly speaking, this shift to subjectivity as the best means to human flourishing typified philosophical Daoism’s response to the Confucian obsession with conforming to fixed, external norms.

This shift from dependence on things external to the internal, though it may, in our much more individualistic age seem almost axiomatic, can easily enough be put to the test to discover the extent to which it is true in us. How do we respond when insulted? In this way we see how radically challenging and how fundamentally transformative such a freedom would be. Shi Deqing (1546-1623) tells us why: “[Song Xing] was able to forget reputation but had not yet forgotten his fixed identification with his particular self” (Ziporyn 2009; p 131). It is doubtful that Song Xing achieved even this much, given that the fundamental problem still had not been addressed. Zhuangzi is clearly pointing us toward his concluding statement that the sage has no-self.

Zhuangzi offers this as only an exemplary first step toward the complete non-dependence that he envisions. Song Xing still depended on his own self-opinion; he still needed to be ‘somebody’ in his own estimation. This is a dependence on *performance*; what if we fail of this, as we most certainly will? How could we ever wander free in non-dependence if we depended on success in any activity, even that of wandering free in non-dependence? Though only anecdotally suggested by Zhuangzi, this



non-dependence on even non-dependence seems to be the logical next step in non-dependent wandering. Thus I say, we are perfect by virtue of our being perfectly who we are, however imperfect that may be. There are no conditions to meet. In affirming all things as they are, we are non-dependent on their being in any way different than how they are; this includes ourselves.

Zhuangzi says that “even” Song Xing would laugh at the person who lost himself in pursuing the praise of others because he sees in him a valuable step in the direction of non-dependence, but he also sees that it does not go far enough. Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) identifies this deficiency in yet another way: "Song Rongzi [Xing] did not yet understand how to laugh at himself" (Ziporyn 2009; p131). Such self-directed laughter can demonstrate the freedom of which Zhuangzi speaks. Laughing at ourselves reveals two insights: we fail of our own ideals, and it does not matter. This is non-dependence on non-dependence. Laughter is a natural response of the heart that freely wanders.

We are all like the silly little birds who laugh at the flight of Peng. Can we laugh at that? Can we laugh at ourselves for laughing at others? Laughter can be an expression of self-transcendence; it evinces self-awareness and self-acceptance. Zhuangzi’s sage wanders free and unfettered, not because she has ‘arrived’ at some ideal state, but because she has realized freedom from the futile pursuit of any such thing. Carefree laughter and playfulness are the hallmarks of the Zhuangzian sage. If all is well, why take anything too seriously? If we are perfect in being our imperfect selves, why worry overmuch about those imperfections? Once we can walk this ‘road’ we can more effectively—and happily—walk the other ‘road’ of self-cultivation.

Zhuangzi next introduces us to the legendary sage Liezi. This may be the first extant mention of him, and though it seems to refer to a traditional story about his powers, that he “rode the wind”, we cannot be sure that Zhuangzi did not make him up, as he did so many others. (Scholars tell us that the book that bears his name was probably compiled in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.). This need not concern us, however, unless we are enamored of those powers which Zhuangzi goes on to dismiss as

irrelevant. Liezi, for all his ‘spiritual’ powers, still depended on something.

What did he depend on? The wind. But if this is a failing, how can anyone not perpetually and necessarily fail? Peng also depended on the monsoonal winds to take his flight from Oblivion to Oblivion; all life is utterly dependent upon a seemingly infinite number of physical realities outside its own powers. Our dependence in this tenuous world is total. This dependence of Liezi must, therefore, refer to a different level of dependence, a psychological one. He wanted to fly upon the wind, not simply because he could, but because he believed a demonstration of ‘spiritual’ power was a proof of his sagacity. He still wanted to be a sage. In the end, the pursuit of ‘spirituality’ is little different than the pursuit of the praise of others or of self-respect. He still wanted to be someone.

Whether a true representation of the man himself or not, Zhuangzi uses Liezi as an archetype of that form of ‘spiritual’ pursuit that believes overt demonstrations of ‘spiritual’ power are proof of ‘spiritual’ realization. Zhuangzi never dismisses these as impossible; indeed he seems to suggest they are actually possible, only he sees them as a distraction. They are but another expression of dependence.

In a lengthy story in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter, Zhuangzi makes use of Liezi once again. Here, he becomes so enamored of the prognostic powers of a shaman that he dismisses the way of his own less demonstrative teacher. Only after his teacher makes that shaman flee in fear after exposing him to the depths of his inner emptiness, does Liezi begin to see wherein lays ‘true’ spirituality. “This time I showed him ‘me’ before I am ‘me’—just an empty, chaotic impulse with no identifiable who or what. That’s why he ran away” (7:17). For his part, Liezi had so far failed to understand that true spirituality is no-spirituality, that the so-called ‘true self’ is no-fixed-self, that the sage is not somebody spiritual, but nobody at all. Zhuangzi summarizes: “Just be empty, nothing more” (7:19).

Having shown us three examples of dependence, each successively more liberated than the one before, he now asks us to imagine a radically different way of being in the world: “But what if you depended on

nothing at all? Imagine that. What if you just soared upon whatever seems true of the cosmos and upon everything and anything that happens? How could your soaring ever be brought to a halt” (1:11)?

If this is indeed a statement of Zhuangzi’s ultimate vision, is it not curious that he frames it as a hypothetical question? And is it not more curious still that he leaves it unanswered? The further we delve into Zhuangzi, however, the less this will surprise us. He obviously wishes to assist us into an agreement with his take on things, believing that it will occasion a happier and more fruitful life experience for us, but that same ‘take’ disallows prescribing formulaic answers to life’s needs. We must find them in ourselves if they are to be genuine, and they must be genuine if they are to be effective. Thus does he leave things hypothetical, a mere suggestion of a possibility. And thus, too, does the entirety of this work exude a tone of profound ambiguity. This is comparable to the arts of midwifery, the maieutic methods of Socrates and Kierkegaard, where the goal is not the delivery of a ‘positive teaching’, but rather the creation of an open-ended doubt. And it is, as we might expect, a practical demonstration of the Daoist concept of *wuwei*, non-doing. We must, therefore, scratch our heads and engage with everything he says in an attempt to understand. Who’s to say that the conclusions we draw are the ones he had in mind? Does it matter? Perhaps the process itself is more important than the conclusions we draw. In any event, Zhuangzi’s ambiguity is clearly purposed as the author of the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter observed: “The guidelines within them [his words] are undepletable; giving forth new meanings without shedding the old ones. Vague! Ambiguous! We have not got to the end of them yet” (Ziporyn 2009; p 124).

There is absolutely nothing in the entire universe that is not utterly dependent on a seemingly infinite number of conditions. Given that our dependency in this world is absolute, how can we speak of depending on nothing? It’s a question of attitude. We depend on our bodies to keep us alive—but do we depend on living? Can we release our grip on life in such a way as to accept its end with equanimity? To do so is to enjoy a kind of non-dependence. If nothing *has to* happen, then whatever happens is acceptable. This psychological shift to non-dependence opens up a vast field of freedom and enjoyment in which to wander and play.

This is essentially the full extent of Zhuangzi's vision. It's as simple as that. Many interpreters would have him proposing some form of religious project of redemption, of uniting with some Ultimate Dao, or even the attainment of immortality. This, at my reading, is the exact opposite of what Zhuangzi has in mind. Any such project must necessarily depend on a mess of assumptions, none of which could possibly be substantiated either intellectually or experientially. Dependence on the reasoning mind, Zhuangzi suggests in the next chapter, is to depend on the utterly undependable (2:14). Interpreting experience as definitively explaining anything is equivalent to interpreting a dream within a dream (2:56). In the realm of non-dependence, on the other hand, nothing has to be true, nothing needs to be explained. However things actually 'are', whatever seems to 'happen'—these can all be "charioted upon" with equanimity.

But Zhuangzi speaks of charioting on what is "true" of the cosmos, one might protest. Yes, but what is 'true' of the cosmos remains so without any need of our knowing what that is (1:10). We are able to soar upon it not because we know what is true of it (a dependence on knowing), but because we do not know it and need not know it. Perhaps Zhuangzi would have us think back to his question, "Is blue the sky's *true* color" (1:3)? It doesn't matter; when Peng looks down he also sees only blue, but he soars nonetheless. Indeed, rather than being an obstacle to our soaring, our not-knowing becomes the very means by which we do so. It is the fact that we cannot know (or, more accurately, cannot know whether we know or not (2:48)) that facilitates our release into non-dependence—we do not *need* to know. The 'obstacle' of our not-knowing is thus an essential one for Zhuangzi, but his whole point is that any and every obstacle is an occasion for our soaring. Our non-dependence is predicated on our utter, inescapable dependence on all that happens around us and to us.

Finally, it is also worth noting that 'true' (*zheng*) as used here is not intended to convey a factual proposition about reality, but means something more akin to "aligned with" (Ziporyn 2009; p 218-9). Implied is that "true" is a relationship with things, not an idea about them. To chariot upon what is true is to align oneself with events as they arise, and that requires no knowledge of the why or what of them, but only an acceptance of them as they appear to be.

## NO-SELF AS NO-FIXED-IDENTITY

We have now arrived at one of the most apparently definitive of Zhuangzi's statements regarding the character of someone who has fully realized his vision. Yet, far from unambiguously clarifying things, this only serves to throw us into an even thornier ambiguity. The sage has no-self; but what does this mean?

Let us begin by reiterating one of our most fundamental points of departure: The Zhuangzian sage is only a hypothetical. Zhuangzi himself was not a sage by his own reckoning. This may disappoint the religious yearning in us for a 'consummate human being', a fully realized guru for us to emulate, but it also frees us from a dependence on any such fantasy (6:10). As only a hypothetical, this definitive representation of the nature of a sage is immediately robbed of its power to fetter us with a dependence on an unrealizable goal. If our wandering depended on the realization of anything, especially some goal of 'enlightenment', then no wandering would ever be possible. The only alternative, therefore, must be that we wander in whatever reality we presently find ourselves. We must wander now, just as we are. If need be, we must wander in our inability to wander. Yet does this not throw us into a nonsensical infinite regress? It does; but when has the actual stuff of living ever made 'sense'?

Why do we wish to wander at all? We desire to more fully enjoy our lives, an affirmable goal in that it is the process of life itself. Self-inquiry, however, will also most certainly uncover in this aspiration a desire to be 'somebody'—the desire to be *seen to be* a 'sage'. But the sage is a nobody. It is here, therefore, that the work must be done, and this is why Zhuangzi sums it all up by telling us the sage has no-self.

We have yet to consider what this entails. Let us begin by saying that no-self does not mean no self. Ziqi declares, "*I have lost me*" (2:2). When Yan Hui practices "fasting of the heart-mind", *he* declares "*I have not yet begun to exist*" (4:12). In both cases there remains a self in relationship to itself; only that relationship has changed. Instead of taking their selves as fixed and static identities, they have come to see them as "temporary

lodgings” (2:61). This is the realization of “no-fixed-identity”. Identity there is, but it is appreciated as only a passing phenomenon that need not be grasped as something that can be lost. We see this in a metaphorical description of a sage-king: “Sometimes he thinks he’s a horse, other times he thinks he’s an ox—he has no-fixed-identity and thus sees no need to impose himself upon others” (7:2). And we see it in those on their deathbeds who contentedly release themselves into the next transformation (6:14ff). Identified with the cosmos as ceaseless transformation, their own transformation incurs no loss.

No-self is thus equivalent to no-fixed-identity, and this is participating in the experience of being a self without clinging to it as anything other than a passing phenomenon. It is a relationship that allows for our carefree and playful wandering in the identity that we presently find ourselves to ‘be’. It is a psychological movement, not a metaphysical one.

Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) succinctly sums up the more obvious implications of non-dependence and its correspondence to no-fixed-identity: “[T]his is what it means to be free of dependence: not leaning on things to establish some identity for oneself, not leaning on projects to establish some merit for oneself, not leaning on actualities to establish some name for oneself” (Ziporyn 2009; p129).

## **REFLECTIONS—PART THREE**

### **FOUR ILLUSTRATIVE STORIES**

The chapter concludes with four stories illustrating the themes already discussed and introduces another, Zhuangzi’s signature “usefulness of the useful”. The first addresses the folly of the pursuit of ‘name’ (a fixed-identity) through political power. The final three more closely reflect the themes of the Peng myth, especially the trope of the small consciousness scoffing at the large consciousness, the autobiographical character of which is seen in the last two stories in which Zhuangzi’s friend Huizi is the scoffer.

The first story is pregnant with all manner of Daoist themes. Yao, a patron saint of the Confucians, was praised for his having ceded his empire to Shun on the basis of his merit, rather than to his own son. Zhuangzi mocks this by suggesting that Shun was only Yao's second best choice and came only after a sage of Daoist stripe refused it. Why did he refuse the empire? Because the empire had no need of an exercise of overt power since the sage's unseen charismatic influence had already occasioned its flourishing. This is a common Daoist theme and represents the power of *wuwei*, non-coercive doing, in the political world. Did Zhuangzi actually believe in such powers? I'd like to think not, but we cannot know. We do know, from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, however, that he did believe in the effectiveness "non-being the change" on a more personal level.

If the empire had no need of the sage's overt exercise of power, then the only reason he would have accepted the reins of power would be for the "name", the prestige and respect it would bring him. But if he depended on that, he'd be nothing more than a guest, wholly dependent on the whims of fortune. Today's hero is tomorrow's villain. The metaphors of the bird content with a branch and the mole with a belly-full of water illustrate the contentedness of those who do not depend on the accumulation of things external. Only those who know what is enough can know contentment. And only those who do not depend on even that can wander free.

In the second story, the madman Jieyu relates to Jian Wu a fantastic story of a sage who only subsists on wind and dew. Wu, who thinks the story a lot of ridiculous "big talk", in his turn, relates it to Lian Shu who chastens him for his blindness in spiritual matters.

But the story *is* so fantastic as to be ridiculous. In addition to subsisting on only wind and dew, this sage hitches his chariot to dragons so as to wander beyond the known world. The parallels here with Peng and the sage's charioting upon all dependence so as to wander are immediately clear. But what are we to do with the fact that it is absurdly fantastic? Wu has declared himself unable to believe it, yet Shu, presumably himself a sage, gladly endorses it.

Zhuangzi is having fun at our expense. If we believe that it matters whether these stories must either be believable or unbelievable, true or false, then we are still depending on our reason in an attempt to make 'sense' of the world. In the end, Zhuangzi doesn't believe that any of it is 'true'. No such sage exists. It is not true that Jieyu spoke to Wu. Neither Jieyu nor Wu as represented ever existed (though Jieyu appears in the *Analects* (18:5) where he makes fun of Confucius). Through fantastic stories, Zhuangzi hopes to bring us face to face with our own not-knowing. Our integration with our being in a world, our harmony in the life experience, cannot be realized through formulaic propositions of 'truth'. This can only happen organically, through release into the life process itself.

Wu's rejection of Jieyu's "big talk" parallels the tiny birds scoffing at Peng's incredible flight and Huizi's similar rejection of Zhuangzi's "big talk" as illustrated in concluding two stories. Though often seemingly irreconcilably divergent, there are frequently subtle threads of relevance that knit these stories together.

The story also makes yet another reference to the politically beneficial effects of *wuwei*. Wang Fuzhi is able to show this political spin as a further elucidation of the idea of no-fixed-identity: "[T]hose who see themselves internally as having one fixed identity believe there is a world existing outside themselves, and those for whom there is a 'world' on the one hand relating to 'oneself' on the other will use that self to try to rule the world" (Ziporyn 2009; p 134). Trying to rule the world need not be trying to become an emperor, but simply attempting to impose oneself on things and others. "But", Wang warns, "one who does not allow others to wander far and unfettered can never do so himself" (Ziporyn 2009; p 135).

In the next two stories we have Huizi demonstrating his bondage to reason and, consequentially, to conventional ideas of usefulness. Zhuangzi's "big words" are useless. Why? Because they do not deal with 'reality' and cannot further the advance of human ambition. But Zhuangzi, with an altogether different perspective on what makes for a happy life, offers two advantages that demonstrate the usefulness of the



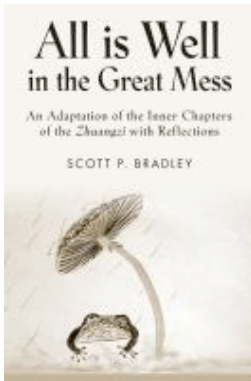
useless. The more mundane of these is simply that usefulness leads to being used and abused. Huizi's "stink tree" survives because it is useless. And there is much to be said for survival (though we needn't depend on it!). More important to Zhuangzi's vision, however, is that uselessness reflects a release from dependence on any and all worldly outcomes. Carefree wandering precludes believing that one must be useful to have a 'worthwhile' life. If this does not seem like an inexcusable slap in the face to a central human value, then I have failed to express it well. Yet, when the dust settles, Zhuangzi would argue that, *wuwei*, non-being the change, is much more effective than trying to be it. Usefulness is used. Usefulness uses. What uses, also abuses. What is abused, abuses in return. What is pushed pushes back.

Perhaps the best place to begin to understand what is implied by the usefulness of the useless is to look at the largest context conceivable. The classic metaphors are found in the *Laozi*: "Thirty spokes make a wheel, yet it is the emptiness at their hub that makes it useful. . . . Doors and windows are empty space, but they alone make a room useful. Thus, something is made useful by virtue of the useless." "The Dao is empty; we use it but it is never emptied" (XI, IV; my adaptations). Metaphysical Dao, the unnamable and unimaginable Mystery, is the supremely Useless—yet it is only in taking account of It that things have any context at all. This was perhaps the most profound insight of philosophical Daoism. Previously, it was believed that in *knowing* 'Heaven' we could make use of it. The proto-Daoists realized that it is in our *not-knowing* it that it becomes useful. As beings with emptiness at our core we can either attempt to orient ourselves to a Ground of Being, something known, or to Emptiness, something unknowable. Daoism chooses Emptiness—I will leave the reader to decide which more closely follows our actual existential experience. The essence of the Daoist experience, therefore, is release into the Unknowable, and this, for Zhuangzi, equates to thankfully and playfully following along with whatever unfolds in non-dependence on any particular outcome.

Another way to imagine this is through the concepts of Yin and Yang where Yang is being/usefulness and Yin is non-being/uselessness. Daoism prioritizes orientation toward Yin. Why? Because human *beings*

are all about yang-ing—doing and knowing—and have sought to compensate for their inner yin, the emptiness at their core, by simply engaging in more yang-ing. This amounts to the relentless pursuit of being a concrete ‘someone’ when no such outcome is possible. Philosophical Daoism acknowledges the futility of such a project and instead harmonizes with the human experience as it actually manifests—just another temporary expression of the ever-transforming.

This is the foundational meaning of the usefulness of the useless which informs every aspect of the philosophical Daoist’s orientation to herself and to the world. Embedded in Mystery, what is not mystery? In as much as the human experience is unresolvedly tenuous—utterly ungrounded—why not harmonize with that experience and thereby cast off the burden of the relentless pursuit of something fixed and sure?



*This book is an adaptation of and interpretive commentary on a portion of the Classical Chinese work known as the Zhuangzi. As such, it is principally a philosophical work. However, since it hopes to stimulate others to grow their own philosophies of life, it might also be described as a work advocating self-improvement.*

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